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MERLE, THE MUTINEER: or, THE BRAND OF THE RED ANCHOR.

A ROMANCE OF SUNNY LANDS AND BLUE WATERS.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "THE DARE DEVIL," "THE CRETAN ROVER," "THE PIRATE PRINCE," "FREELANCE, THE BUCCANEER," ETC., ETC.



"GOD IN HEAVEN! IF THAT BOY IS DEAD, EVERY MAN ON THIS SCHOONER SHALL RUE THE DEED!"

Merle, the Mutineer;

OR,

THE BRAND OF THE RED ANCHOR.

A Romance of Sunny Lands and Blue Waters.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
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CHAPTER I.

THE SEA-HAWKS.

"Give way, men! there lies your game!"

The clear, trumpet-like voice rung out stern in the darkness—a darkness almost tangible, for inky clouds hung low in the heavens, and their shadows, trailing over the waters, made them as black as midnight.

No land was visible—no light penetrated the gloom—only the ebony skies and the dead-black sea, as calm as the pulseless bosom, for not a breath fanned the waters, and a silence, like that which broods in the tomb, hung over all.

Like trailing serpents, creeping upon a common prey, half a dozen dark objects swept noiselessly over the placid waters, grim and threatening.

Like a phantom, as silent and as weird-looking, a schooner lay upon the ocean, and directly in the path of the gliding boats.

The storm-clouds, the ink-dyed waters, the motionless vessel, and the crawling boats, were all that the eye of man could see in that midnight darkness.

"Give way, men! there lies your game!"

The ringing order echoed far over the sea, and was answered by a wild cheer from a hundred throats.

But the shouts upon those brave lips were drowned by a roar and crash that shook the very sea, and the blackness of night was changed into lurid light, as a dozen brazen mouths burst forth with defiance from the crouching, gaunt hull of the schooner, and a cruel, iron hurricane tore relentlessly through timbers, flesh and bone.

"There lies your game, men!"

It was the same ringing voice—louder, clearer, and undaunted by the iron storm that had burst upon the devoted boats.

Another cheer answered—fainter than the other, for many lips were sealed in death, and many more were moaning in agony; but on rushed the boats, driven by arms of steel, and the combat of life or doom was begun; the schooner no longer appeared like a phantom, but rather like a blazing hell upon the waters, for upon her gore-painted decks were men in the image of God, struggling like fiends broke loose from an Inferno—fighting, bleeding, falling, dying, yet still grappling with death to gain the mastery over their fellow-beings.

For a short while only could such a combat rage—the combatants were mortal; then a change came, for the gallant leader of the assailants was struck down, though not conquered, for he half-rose, and still held his shattered cutlass on guard, to ward off the half-dozen death-blows aimed at his heart.

His followers had been beaten back from his side; he was alone confronting his foes, and they knew no mercy, and their blades were thirsty for his life; yet no suppliant cry escaped his lips; he would die ere he would beg for quarter to those before him—those whom he had hoped to subdue.

Down swept the weapons toward the defenseless breast, driven by hands crime-stained and relentless; but suddenly there came a flash of light, and the ring of steel against steel, as one bright blade beat back the life-searching cutlasses.

"Back, hounds! You shall not slay a disarmed and fallen man!"

The voice was boyish, yet stern and in deadly earnest—the speaker a mere youth of sixteen, who had sprung fearlessly between the fallen man and his doom.

"Rise, sir, and retreat with your men; quick, or it will be too late."

The man, bleeding from several ugly wounds, sprung to his feet, glanced at the angry faces confronting him, looking grim and inhuman by the light of the battle-lanterns, and then turned his gaze upon the youth, who still stood between him and danger.

"Boy, you have saved my life. We shall meet again, and then I will give you yours in return."

Ere one of his foes could prevent, the brave man bounded along the deck, and springing over the bulwarks, was drawn on board of his own boat, which had lingered there, loath to leave their gallant leader in the power of an implacable enemy.

With wild cries of rage and disappointment, the schooner's crew rushed forward, and poured a hot fire upon the flying boats, bearing back

but one-half the number they had brought to the attack; but strong arms dragged them swiftly through the black waters, and the gloom soon hid them from view, and darkness and silence again rested upon the deep—no, not silence, for the moans of the wounded and the death-cries of the dying arose from the vessel's deck, and were caught up and borne away on the air.

Then there burst from a score of voices a dangerous cry against one on that schooner's deck—one who stood silent and alone, glancing out into the pitchy gloom.

"Hang the traitor! Up to the yard-arm with the boy!"

The youth started, and faced toward those who threatened him, while his right hand dropped quickly upon his cutlass-hilt, his left upon the butt of a pistol.

"Run him up to the yard-arm!"

The cry was loud and threatening, and there followed the rush of many feet—a shout of warning, a shot, a crunching sound of steel meeting bone, and then yells of triumph.

"Now, up with him, lads!" shouted a stern voice, and from the deck arose a dark mass of writhing humanity, to dangle between sea and sky.

"By the Heaven above! who hangs there?"

Like guilty wretches all turned at the deep tones and beheld a tall form bound over the bulwarks and stand in their midst.

"The chief! The chief!"

The cry broke in terror from a dozen lips, and the wild crew shrunk back from the sweep of his single arm.

"Answer! Whom have you hung?"

"The youth, sir; he was a traitor," shouted one of the crew.

"God in heaven! if that boy is dead, every man on this schooner shall rue the deed," yelled the chief, and springing forward he quickly seized the rope from the hands of those who held it, and lowered the swinging form to the deck, where it lay limp and motionless.

"He lives! It is well for you, accursed hounds, that his heart is not stilled," hissed the chief, and raising the insensible youth in his strong arms he bore him into the cabin.

A few moments after he was again on deck, and the schooner was rocking upon the waves that were lashed into restlessness by a fresh breeze—the forerunner of the storm that soon must burst upon the waters.

"Up with that anchor! let fall those sails! We must run out of here under cover of the storm, or with the morning we will have every boat from the frigate to attack us."

Every trace of anger had gone from the chief's voice, and the crew sprung to work with a will, anxious to redeem themselves in his eyes.

Quickly the schooner bent to the breeze, and forging through the waters flew like a sea-bird through the darkness, her chief at her helm, and a silence that could be felt on board.

Presently the chief was joined by one, who came from the cabin, and said, quietly:

"The boy is recovering, sir."

"It is well that he is; now tell me about the attack."

"Well, sir, all was in readiness, as you ordered, and we fired as soon as we caught sight of the boats, which was not until they were almost upon us, as they came with muffled oars."

"How many boats, sir?"

"Six, captain, bearing fully a hundred men."

"A large force; the lads deserve credit for beating them back. Go on, sir."

"Well, sir, we beat them back, after a terribly hot fight, and would have captured their leader, who was severely wounded, had not the youth prevented, and allowed him to escape."

"The boy did right; and for this those devils called him a traitor, and would have taken his life!"

"Yes, sir, for I was powerless to prevent."

"Bah! I prevented, and thank Heaven I arrived as I did. I had just landed, on my way to the cavern, heard the attack, and returned just in time—What is it, sir?" and the chief turned upon a seaman who approached.

"The boats are off our starboard quarter, sir; shall we fire upon them?"

"No; it would show the frigate just where we are."

"Sail ho!"

The cry came from forward, and in tones that were tremulous.

"Where-away?" asked the chief, calmly; then he added, quickly:

"It is the frigate, and right in our course; we must put about or pass in a cable's length of her—ha! I have it—stand ready, all, to strip the schooner of canvas, for the storm will strike us soon."

Then, to the surprise and alarm of his crew, their captain still held on his course, directly for the frigate, which, under storm-sails, was standing off and on off the entrance to the little inlet, in which the schooner had been entrapped.

Nearer and nearer the two vessels drew together, and frequently there came a loud hail from the frigate's deck.

"Aho! the schooner! Bravo, Grenville, for your success!"

"Ay, ay, sir! We have the schooner all right

—I will pass to leeward and lay to until the gale blows over," replied the chief, through his trumpet, and he swept by under the stern of the huge vessel and not a cable's length away.

But not to lay to, as the chief had said, for, like a mad racer, the little vessel scudded away out of danger, just as the storm struck the sea, while the stern man who guided its destinies, said grimly, and with a shadow of triumph in his tones:

"That was a bold game to play, but I have won; if those boats have not put back under the shelter of the land, they will surely go down in this blow."

CHAPTER II.

HEAVEN FORBIDS!

"AND I say he shall die, if my own knife has to find his heart."

"You are right, shipmate; he must die, for he is a traitor."

"Ay, and one whom the chief intends to make his second in command."

"Had we done what he did, the chief himself would have cut us down; but he seems strangely drawn toward the boy."

"Were he his own son, it should not save him; ay, and if he depends on him, it will be at the risk of his own life."

"You seem terribly hard on the boy, shipmates; how has he injured you?"

It was the only voice of two-score men, crouching down forward, while the schooner drove on like a mad spirit, that had been raised in defense of the youth, and all eyes turned upon him.

"What wrong has he done us, say you? Why from a mere waif, a boy, he has been made an officer over us, and to-night saved the life of a man who has been our most persistent enemy! I tell you, shipmates, that boy will yet run our necks in the noose if we do not first string him up."

"Now is as good a time as any, and let us demand him from the chief, and take him if he refuses to give him up, which he will of course do."

A murmur of general assent greeted the words of the speaker, and with one accord they arose to their feet.

The schooner was driving along at a fearful pace, and the gale was sweeping the sea in fury, while the clouds hung like black funeral veils upon the waters.

An hour before, the schooner had run its bold way under the very guns of the frigate, and having gained an offing, the fearless player of the desperate game for life had left his second in command at the wheel, and gone down into the cabin to look after his young *protege*, while his crew on deck were plotting against the brave boy, who lay weak and suffering upon a lounge, yet now returned to consciousness.

As the swinging lamp of the cabin fell upon the youth, it displayed a form of elegance, and yet of strength far above the average of one of his years, which could not have been more than sixteen.

Yet, in spite of his age, there was a certain manliness about him that indicated his ability to play a man's part.

His face was a study for an artist, who desired womanly beauty and manhood combined, for the features were faultless, the eyes large, intensely black, and full of fire, and the teeth milk-white and even.

Only the fearless, resolute mouth, yet unshaded by a mustache, took from the face the beauty that would have best suited a woman.

His hair was wavy, dark brown, and worn long, falling upon the collar of his sailor shirt, which, with white duck pants, comprised his attire.

Around the neck was a dark-blue mark left by the cruel rope, and his face was as white as marble, and as emotionless, as he lay upon the lounge, until the chief entered; then a bright light shot into his eyes, and a smile curled his lip, as he held forth his hand and said, calmly: "You saved me from those devils, who would have hung me, because I would not allow them to strike down an unarmed and wounded man."

The chief advanced quickly and took the hand, throwing himself into an easy-chair as he did so. He was a man of massive frame, clad in an undress uniform, and with a dark, bearded face that was bold and reckless in the extreme.

"Yes," he said, in his deep, though not unpleasant tones, "I have more to thank you for, Merle, than I imagined, for I have just learned that Arthur Grenville was the man who led the attack upon the schooner, and it was his life that you saved."

"Yes, sir; it was the same officer whom we met in New Orleans some weeks since, and who has so often endeavored to capture the schooner. You know him then?"

A strange smile crossed the face of the man; but he said quietly:

"Yes, I know him well."

Then rising quickly he began to pace the cabin, in spite of the bounding of the vessel.

For some moments he continued his unsteady walk, as though too nervous to sit still, and then turned suddenly toward the youth:

"Merle, the life we lead may again bring us face to face with Captain Arthur Grenville, and under any, and all circumstances, do your utmost to protect his life—ay, if you strike dead the man who raises hand against him."

"Once, in the long ago, we were friends, Arthur Grenville and I; but he believes me dead, and I am dead to those who once knew me; ay, dead to honor, too, for I am an outlaw, a price upon my head, and the name I bear stained with crime; but once I was far different, and could hold my head up among my peers, and—bah! why will I speak of the past?"

"Circumstances, over which I held no control made me what I am, and now I am what I am."

"To-night I seem strangely moody, and there is a pressure here," and he laid his hand upon his heart.

For a moment he stood thus, and then said, with deep feeling:

"Merle, if aught befalls me—if I should die, I leave you in command of this vessel; yes, and far more, for I possess untold wealth, hidden far from here in an island—Ha! what means this disturbance?" and the chief turned angrily toward the cabin companionway, now crowded by a dozen forms.

"Captain, we have come to ask a favor of you, sir," said one of the crew, stepping in advance of his comrades.

"Return to the deck, lads, for your presence here may excite Lieutenant Merle; I will hear what you have to say on to-morrow," said the chief, calmly.

"There is no time like the present, Captain Freelance, and it is of the boy we would speak," doggedly said the ringleader.

"Ah! you come to ask him to pardon your mutinous conduct?"

"Not a bit of it, sir; we come to carry out our intention of stringing him up to the yard-arm."

"Curses and Furies! do you dare beard me in my cabin?" and the chief turned with blazing eyes upon the intruders, who now half-filled the cabin, while the youth rose to a sitting position and fearlessly gazed upon his enemies.

"We have come for a plain talk, captain, and now that we've set sail, we might as well have it out if it leads us upon breakers."

"And upon breakers it will lead you; begone!" and Captain Freelance pointed sternly toward the deck.

But not a man moved, though their faces paled; they felt that the die was cast and that a struggle must come, and all eyes turned upon their ringleader, a young man who had evidently seen better days in the past, but having cast his lot with outlawry, was now reckless to desperation. Perhaps he felt that the youth held a place that should have been his.

"Captain, we wish no quarrel with you, sir."

"Then leave this cabin at once."

"Not until we gain our object, sir, and we are determined to do that, for you have made that unknown lad an officer over us who have served you for years."

"Ay, and should harm befall me he shall command this schooner."

"Never!" burst from every mutineer.

"Ha! I am then to be ruled by my men, it would seem?" and the chief flashed his eyes over the stern faces before him.

"No, captain, we will obey you in all but one thing; you have led us in many a desperate encounter, and we know you, while you have gained for us gold; but we did object to your placing over us as an officer that boy, and—"

"Captain Freelance, let me speak a word to these rebellious hounds," and the youth, with an effort arose to his feet.

"You made me an officer, sir, under you—a position I never sought, or desired, for—pardon me, sir—I cared not to sail beneath an outlawed flag; but you saved my life, and in return I have endeavored to serve you until I could—again pardon me—find honorable service."

"To-night I crossed these men in their thirst for blood, and for it they sought my life, and again you saved me."

"Now, as I am the bone of contention, let me leave the schooner at the nearest port, and—"

"No, Merle, I will not consent to it, for I have a service that you shall enter upon: and as for these fellows, they shall not dictate to me, as long as I have a good right arm to crush any one who opposes me."

"Captain Freelance, this argument is all useless. We have come for the youth, and have him we will, if we take him over your dead body."

"By the God above! that speech rings well," and the chief bounded forward and felled the speaker to the floor with one blow of his clenched hand, for he was unarmed.

A yell of fury broke from the crew, and in an instant they hurled themselves upon their leader, while a shot resounded through the cabin, like the roar of a heavy gun.

It was fired by the youth, and the bullet found the heart of the one at whom it was aimed.

But it checked not the maddened mutineers, and rushing forward a dozen seized the object

of their hatred, and he, too, was borne bodily to the floor, though struggling bravely.

"The chief is dead!"

The cry came from the lips of the ringleader, as he arose to his feet, a drawn knife in his hand, the blade to the hilt crimsoned.

A hush fell upon all present; the bold deed had struck them dumb, and their eyes turned upon the face of their leader; it was white and motionless, and they knew that he was dead.

Instantly a change of feeling fell upon all—they had not intended to kill him, only to bind him until their revenge against the youth was satiated.

"And you killed him?" cried a dozen voices turning upon the murderer.

"Yes."

He saw not the danger in the avowal of his deed; his ambition made him blind and foolhardy, and he shouted with vicious triumph: "Ay! See, here is his mark on my forehead, and he bears mine in his heart. Now hang that boy to the yard-arm; my shipmates on deck have already hurled Reedwell into the sea, and I am your chief."

Like frenzied wolves, those whom he had trusted, threw themselves upon him; the cabin lamp was knocked from its chains and fell with a crash, and in total darkness the mad scuffle went on.

But only for a moment, and then the wild crew rushed on deck, dragging in their midst the youth whom now they felt no power could save, and leaving behind them three dead bodies—their chief, their ringleader in the mutiny, and the man who had fallen before the shot of Merle.

Once on deck, and the scene was scarcely less wild than that which had been enacted in the cabin, for a few of the crew, who had been true to their ringleader, had just thrown their officer, Reedwell, into the sea, but not until he had slain two of their number.

Out upon the wide waste of dashing waters he had been left to his doom, and under other hands the beautiful schooner was held on her course, bounding, reeling and rushing through the chaotic seas that swept over its decks, and, as if crouching and flying from the inky storm-clouds that hung above it, and from which burst angry roars of thunder.

One glance around him, and the youth felt that his doom was sealed, for he saw that the crew held the deck, and he set his teeth and nerved his heart to face death fearlessly.

"Swing him up, lads! It's a dirty business and must soon be over," cried a voice above the howlings of his comrades, and a rope was again thrown around the bruised neck, and a dozen hands were ready to hang like a dog the brave boy who stood in their midst, and from whose white lips came no cry for mercy.

"Now, lads! all together!" ordered the self-selected leader, and the rope tightened, and the youth swung clear of the deck.

But, not to die, for, from the black cloud hovering above the flying schooner, descended a livid lance of flame, upon the needle-like point of the mainmast, shivering it into a thousand atoms, and, dividing into arrows of fire, the lurid lightning rushed to the deck, and pierced the hearts of those who held the youth in mid-air, striking them down, with others of the maddened crew.

One wild yell of horror, and the fright-crazed crew who yet lived fled in terror to the cabin to shut out the terrific scene, for they felt that Heaven had forbidden the murder their crime-stained hands would have perpetrated.

CHAPTER III.

DRIFTING TO DOOM.

"BOATS ahoy!"

The cry arose from the mast-head of the frigate, and startled all who heard it, for what boats could be out upon those dark waters, over which the storm must burst ere many seconds.

"What! can Grenville have left the men to return in the boats, in the face of this threatening gale?" cried a distinguished-looking officer, whose gray hair looked like silver threads, as the binnacle light fell upon it.

"It was rash, sir, and not like Captain Grenville, commodore," replied a young officer in the uniform of a senior lieutenant.

"Hark! they hail! What says he, Sebastian?" and as Commodore Brainard spoke, there came across the waters in clear tones:

"Aho! the frigate! Bring to yonder schooner!"

"It is Grenville's voice! The schooner has escaped him then, and cleverly eluded us! Quick! Mr. Sebastian, let the frigate wear round and give chase," cried the commodore, excitedly.

"And the boats, sir? See, the storm is breaking."

"True; ahoy, Grenville! Pull for your lives or you will be swamped! Lay her to, helmsman! Lively, if you would save your shipmates' lives!" and the voice of the old commodore rung out, as it had not done in many long years.

All was now intense excitement on board the frigate, which at once obeyed her helm and swept around with its head to meet the gale, while two hundred men sprang to the gangways to aid their comrades on board, for the boats were now but a few lengths away.

"Pull hard, lads! Bravo!" and the voice of Commodore Brainard was drowned in the wild cheer that broke from the crew, as the boats struck the side of the frigate.

"Lightly, men! There are badly wounded here for you to handle!" cried a clear voice, which all recognized as that of the captain of the frigate, Arthur Grenville.

"Ay, ay, sir; but the sea will be less gentle than we are, if we don't get them on board," answered an old sailor, and the wounded and dead in the boat were quickly passed over the side; their more fortunate unwounded comrades followed, and the boats were hauled up, just as the gale broke in fury upon the devoted ship.

For a few moments the stern orders of the officers were heard, the snapping of ropes, creaking of spars, wash of the waves and howling of the winds, and then the frigate rushed away before the gale.

Then Commodore Brainard turned to Arthur Grenville, and shouted:

"You lost the schooner then?"

"Yes, commodore; I was beaten off, with the loss of half my men, though the lads fought like devils. The schooner had double as many as I believed were on board."

"Too bad; and he hailed me as he went by, and I believed it to be you! That Captain Freelance is protected by Satan."

"It would seem so, sir; but we must soon overhaul the schooner in this storm, as the sea is too wild for him to run, long."

"He may lay to. Have double look-outs placed, Captain Grenville, and then come into the cabin, for I would learn of your attack; but you are white as a sheet, and—"

"I am wounded, sir; yet only slightly, I think. I will leave Mr. Sebastian on deck," and Captain Grenville followed the commodore into the cabin, where, after having his wounds, which were not serious, attended to by the surgeon, he made known to his commander the result of his desperate combat on board the schooner, and of the conduct of the youth who had saved his life.

"He was a brave lad and shall not be forgotten, when the schooner falls into our hands, for take it we must," said Commodore Brainard, firmly.

"Yes, sir; Freelance must not be allowed to escape this time; but I beg, Commodore Brainard, that you will pardon the youth, in return for his service to me. He was a handsome, fearless fellow, and I fear got into trouble after we were beaten off."

"It shall be as you wish, Grenville; but you did not see the chief?"

"No, sir; I am confident he was not on board, and that the old fisherman told us the truth, when he said Captain Freelance had run into the cove, to gain information from one of his spies, who dwells on the coast."

"Doubtless; now do you feel able to go on deck?"

"Yes, sir; my wounds trouble me little—What is it, sir?" and Captain Grenville turned to a midshipman who just then entered.

"The gale is increasing, sir, and Mr. Sebastian bade me report that a vessel was struck by lightning two leagues to leeward, sir."

Both officers at once hurried on deck, to discover that the storm had increased to a hurricane, and that the frigate was driving furiously before it.

Around them all was inky darkness, only when, ever and anon, a flame of light would dart seaward from some black cloud, which seemed almost trailing its skirts in the wild waters.

It certainly was a fearful night, and the crew stood at their posts white and expectant, for, far away over the raging waves, they had just beheld a livid flash descend upon some unfortunate vessel, which they felt was doomed.

Might not their noble ship also meet the same fate?

Such was the dread in every heart, and brave men trembled as the thunders shook the deep, and the lightnings played around them, looking like the fiery swords of some huge demons of the clouds engaged in desperate and deadly combat, while the crashing of heaven's artillery sounded like the hoarse voices of the giant combatants.

"Did you see the vessel, Sebastian?" shouted Captain Grenville in the ear of the lieutenant.

"For an instant only, sir."

"Was it the schooner?" followed the eager question.

"I could not tell, sir, the flash was so blinding; we are heading directly toward it."

"Then we shall soon know, if the craft has not gone down."

All eyes were now strained over the waters ahead, and thus many minutes passed away, until a blinding glare caused every eye to close involuntarily, so vivid was the light upon sea and sky.

"Wreck ho!"

It was Arthur Grenville's voice that rung out clear, and then followed in startling tones:

"Port! port your helm! hard a-port! We are driving over him!"

The helmsmen threw their weight upon the wheel; the obedient vessel obeyed her helm,

and the bows swept away from the danger, though not a moment too soon, for, from hundreds of throats broke a startled cry:

"The wreck! the wreck!"

"There, not five fathoms away, and riding on a mighty wave, as every eye beheld it, was a vessel's hull, for the masts were gone, and above the roar of the tempest arose shrieks and howlings infernal, as though the wreck was peopled by a crew of lost spirits.

Though every face on board the frigate was blanched, the ashen hue deepened as those wailing, demoniacal yells smote their ears, and in the darkness each man endeavored to read what was the thought of the other.

Down between two mighty waves sunk the wreck from sight, and again it toppled high, as the quarter-deck of the frigate was off its quarter.

"Frigate, ahoy!"

The voice thrilled all who heard it; in the midst of those devilish howlings it seemed human.

"Ahoy the wreck!" cried Captain Grenville, above the storm.

"Keep me in sight until daylight," came in the same voice that had hailed the frigate.

"That boy's voice among a million! It is the schooner!" almost shrieked Captain Grenville to Commodore Brainard; and then, through his silver trumpet he continued: "Ay, ay; we will keep near you."

As he spoke the frigate dashed on out of hailing distance, and the wild laughter and shrieks from the wreck were no longer heard, to the great relief of the superstitious seamen, who felt assured that the storm-tossed hull was manned by a spirit crew—the spirits of men long since dead and damned, forever drifting to doom!

CHAPTER IV. THE WRECK.

WHEN the frigate had swept furiously past the wreck, Captain Grenville gave the order to lay to, and ere long the dismasted hulk drove by, now on the summit of a wave, now lost to sight far down in the trough of the sea.

Upon the vessel-of-war every eye was on the watch to hold the wreck in view, and to every ear came the weird and wild sounds, as if of mad revelry, over lost souls, by fiends already enduring the torments of the accursed.

Thus through the long hours of that night of storm did the frigate keep near the driving hulk; but toward daybreak the fierce gale began to blow itself out, and the dark clouds skurrying away, left the blue sky visible.

But the wind still swept the waters, the waves ran high, and as the sun came up from the sea the wreck was visible a quarter of a mile away, to the great surprise of the superstitious seamen, who had firmly believed it would disappear with the darkness, to haunt them again with night coming on.

Commodore Brainard, and Captain Grenville, in spite of his wounds, had remained on deck during the entire night, and, as the sunlight streamed across the sea their glasses were leveled at the wreck.

"It is the schooner's hull, I am confident—long, low in the water, gaunt amidstships, and the stump of the foremast visible, rakes boldly," said Arthur Grenville, slowly, as his glance took in the different points of the dismasted vessel.

"Yes, it certainly looks like the hull of the schooner; but we shall soon know, at least when the sea runs down so that we can board him. Do you see any one on board, Grenville?" replied Commodore Brainard.

"No, sir, and I have searched the deck from stem to stern. I hope to Heaven the youth was not washed off in the night," said Captain Grenville, anxiously.

"It is very possible; our decks were swept by the waves, and the wreck must have been drowned most of the time; the bulwarks are shattered badly, I observe."

"Yes, sir; it is where the guns broke through when torn loose from their fastenings. If mortal man is alive on yonder hulk, he has had a fearful night of it."

"And the shrieks and mad laughter, Grenville?"

"I do not understand it, commodore. As soon as I dare venture, I will go on board the wreck, and then the mystery will be solved."

But through the day the wind still blew half a gale, and observing, as night drew near, that there was the prospect of another storm, Captain Grenville determined to make the attempt to board the wreck.

"I would prefer that you should not go, Grenville; the sea is very wild," said Commodore Brainard.

"I fear the men would not go without me, sir, or Sebastian, and I will not risk his life. They are convinced that the wreck is the Flying Dutchman," averred Arthur Grenville.

"Quick! turn your glass on the wreck, Grenville! Is not that a human form?" suddenly cried Commodore Brainard.

"Ay, ay, sir, it is; it is the youth!"

"Lively, lads, and lower away that boat! Volunteers, ahoy!" called out Arthur Gren-

ville, with some excitement, and he again turned his glass upon the wreck. "It is the boy, sir! I saw his face distinctly, as the sunlight pierced that cloud and fell upon it. He is leaning over the taffrail and quietly gazing at the frigate. Ho! fellows, where are you that are to man my boat?" and Captain Grenville turned sternly toward the crew, for not a man had offered himself.

But, at his question, an old weather-beaten seaman stepped forward and saluting with one hand and pulling at his trowsers with the other, he said, bluntly:

"Ef it's ter fight a human, Capt'in Grenville, we're ready, sir; but bein' as we didn't ship on ther frigate ter cruise against ther Devil an' a crew o' speerits, or spooks, we'd ruther you'd excoose us, sir, ef it's the same ter yerself, 'kase yonder wreck hain't o' this world."

"Why, Craig, do you fear to follow where I lead?" asked Arthur Grenville, reproachfully, rather than in anger.

"You is goin' then, sir?"

"I am!"

"Then I'm one as is with yer, sir, ef it's ter tackle ghosts, or the Devil hisself!" firmly announced old Craig.

"An' I is another."

"Count me in, capt'in."

"I'll lay aboard Satan's own craft, ef you goes with me, sir," cried a fourth; and so it went on, until a full boat's crew had volunteered, and all was in readiness to go.

It was now just sunset, and the clouds were darkening and the wind momentarily rising, while the sea ran fearfully high; but the brave officer and his men were not daunted by the dangers they had to face, and the boat was lowered away.

But a sudden lurch of the frigate, a huge passing wave, a fierce gust of wind, and the boat was bottom upward, and the crew struggling in the wild waters.

Ropes were quickly thrown and every assistance rendered, and Captain Grenville and the greater number of the boat's crew were drawn back on board the frigate; but the fearless old seaman, Craig, and several others were lost, the mad waves dragging them off to die in the cruel waters, and their shrieks for help rising above the howling gale.

Once more on his quarter-deck, and undaunted by the desperate danger he had just met, Arthur Grenville again called for volunteers to man another boat; but no response came at his command, and he felt that no earthly power could move the men to attempt to board the wreck now, as they were more than ever convinced that it was a specter craft, with lost spirits for a crew.

Again the veil of night was cast over the sea, and again the gale howled savagely and dismally, and drove the frigate on through the tempest-lashed waters.

Feeling confident that the men would not keep a look-out for the wreck, though they pretended to, Arthur Grenville and his officers remained on deck, and for hours the dismasted hull was held in view, once or twice the frigate running close upon it, and again hearing the diabolical laughter and demoniacal shrieks, as on the night before.

"It seems like a very mad-house; in God's name what can it mean?" asked Wilber Sebastian, anxiously.

"I cannot solve it. Stand as close as you dare on this tack, Sebastian, and I will hail," commanded Captain Grenville, and, speaking-trumpet in hand, he sprung into the rigging and waited.

Nearer and nearer came the frigate to the floating hull, dashing the waves high in air, and bounding like a chip in a whirlpool; nearer and nearer, until the gallant vessel rushed by, not half a dozen fathoms away.

Then to every ear came the mad sounds on board, and it did indeed seem as though the wreck were the abode of souls in torment.

"Ho the wreck! ahoy!" cried Arthur Grenville, hoarsely.

"Ahoy!"

The reply came quick and short.

"What wreck is that?" yelled Captain Grenville, as the frigate swept on.

"The Flying Dutchman! bound from Heaven to Hell! Beware!"

A moan broke from the crowded decks of the frigate at the wild, startling reply, and with a muttered curse upon his lips, Arthur Grenville sprung from the rigging, and joined his officers on the quarter-deck.

"Well, Sebastian, this is wonderful."

"Wonderful, indeed, Grenville; but did you note anything peculiar in the answers to your hail?" asked Commodore Brainard, who had just come on deck, as the frigate passed the wreck.

"I thought I noticed more than one voice in answer to my hail, sir."

"That was it; the second voice was low and indistinct, but it certainly answered you."

"I observed the same thing, commodore," replied Wilber Sebastian.

"Well, the mystery will soon be solved; for see, the storm is breaking away and we will have pleasant weather," and Arthur Grenville

pointed to where the stars were visible through the black clouds.

It was now midnight, and as the gale died away the rain descended in torrents, shutting out from sight the wreck, to the great joy of the crew.

But the frigate was held on a course in which the wreck was supposed to drift, and all waited with intense anxiety the coming of the dawn.

At length the heavy rain, and dying out of the wind, beat down the sea, and the gray of dawn appeared in the east, promising that the long and dismal night would soon pass away.

Then the rain ceased; the clouds drifted away; the blue sky was visible; and as daylight came the frigate lay almost becalmed upon the sea.

"Wreck ho!"

It was the cry of a midshipman in the fore-top, and not a mile away was visible the strange craft that had professed to be that weird and havenless vessel, the terror of the superstitious sailors—the *Flying Dutchman*.

CHAPTER V.

A STARTLING DENOUEMENT.

WITH the calm, and the bright sunlight, the crew of the frigate were less superstitious, and Captain Grenville found little difficulty in getting a boat's crew to board the wreck.

Commodore Brainard watched the boat pull swiftly away from the frigate, saw it approach the schooner and the crew board, and then cried quickly:

"Mr. Sebastian, Grenville is signaling us; what says he?"

"He wishes more men, sir."

"Ay, ay! Call away my gig and I will go to his aid," and the old commodore descended into the cabin, to emerge, a moment after, armed with sword and pistols.

The boat was already alongside, filled with men, and when the commodore had taken his seat in the stern-sheets, the oars were let fall, and the gig flew rapidly over the waters.

In the meantime Arthur Grenville had, as before said, boarded the wreck, and came upon a startling and strange scene, which at once caused him to signal for aid to the frigate.

As he approached the wreck the same wild yells were heard, and springing upon deck, cutlass in hand, Captain Grenville was followed by his men.

The hull indeed was a perfect wreck from stem to stern. The mainmast had been shivered to splinters down to the deck, and the foremast was broken off, leaving a stump of ten or twelve feet, while the bulwarks were shattered and full of huge holes.

The deck was seamed and gashed all over, and but one gun remained on board, and this the pivot thirty-two on the forecastle.

Beneath the shadow of this, and securely lashed to it, was a human form, with white face, wild waving hair, and great hollow, somber eyes.

The broad collar of the sailor-shirt was thrown back, and a circle of dark blue, evidently a bruise, extended around the neck, while a cut was upon the head and a deep gash, as if from a knife, on the bared breast.

The small feet were bare and lacerated, the shapely hands bleeding; but in the face was a look of indomitable pluck and resolution.

"Great God! it is you I find thus!" and Captain Grenville rushed forward, and quickly released the form from the lashings that held him to the gun.

"Yes, sir, I was too weak, with loss of blood, wakefulness and no food to hold on; so I lashed myself securely to the gun," was the reply, in a weak voice.

"Poor fellow! Drink this and you will feel better," and Captain Grenville placed a flask of brandy to the white lips.

After a few eager swallows of the liquor, the youth said, with a smile:

"We are quits, sir, for you have saved my life now."

"Do not speak of it; but, tell me how is it I find you here, and is the schooner peopled with howling demons?"

"It would seem so, sir, to hear them, and in fact they are little better, for—"

"Ah! here is the commodore! Now you can tell us your story."

Commodore Brainard advanced quickly, glancing curiously around him.

"Well, Grenville, who have you there?" and he gazed upon the youth's handsome, though haggard and suffering-pinched face, with admiration.

"It is the youth who saved my life, sir, in the attack upon the schooner; he was just about to tell me his story. Go on, my fine fellow, and let us hear all. This is Commodore Alfred Brainard, of the frigate and flag-ship *Constitution*—whom do I address?"

The youth politely saluted the commodore, and replied, frankly:

"My name is Merle, sir, and I was second-lieutenant on board of this schooner, which was the vessel of Freelance the buccaner."

"Ha! you are a confessed pirate, then?" sternly said Commodore Brainard.

"Yes, sir," fearlessly replied the youth. "Six months ago I was picked up at sea in an open

boat, and the only survivor of a vessel that foundered in a storm.

"Captain Freelance made me his second officer, and, perforce, I accepted. At present I command the wreck, as you see," and the youth smiled grimly, then he added:

"I beg to surrender the vessel and crew to you, sir," and he saluted Captain Grenville.

"And the crew are below decks?"

"You hear them, sir?"

"All drunk, I suppose?"

"All mad by this time, sir, doubtless. They have been shut up there since before dawn the night you attacked the schooner."

"How many in all?"

"Our crew numbered eighty men; but we lost a number in your attack upon us, several more fell in a struggle we had among ourselves, a dozen were killed by lightning, and how many are now alive I cannot say."

"The schooner it was, then, that we saw struck by lightning?"

"Yes, sir, and that stroke saved my life."

"How mean you, boy?" asked Commodore Brainard.

"The crew of the schooner never liked my advancement, sir, to an officer's rank, and hated me—a waif cast up by the sea to the quarter-deck, and because I saved the life of this gentleman, here, the other night, they saw fit to string me up to the yard-arm."

"With the consent of Freelance?"

"No, no, sir; he was ashore and came just in time to save me, for which he incurred the displeasure of his men; but he cut me down and carried me to his cabin; see, I bear their mark on my throat," and Merle pointed to the bruised circle around his neck.

"You do indeed, poor boy. Freelance came just in time," said the commodore, a tone of sympathy in his voice.

"Yes, sir, for I was insensible when he cut me down; but for the act he lost his life—"

"What! Do you speak the truth?"

"Yes, sir, Captain Freelance is dead," sorrowfully said the youth.

"Slain by his men?"

"Yes, sir; after the schooner ran out to sea the men came into the cabin and demanded that I should be given up to them. Whether it was arranged to take the life of Captain Freelance I know not; but he refused to give me up, struck down the ringleader, and a struggle followed, in which the chief lost his life."

"The sea is well rid of a most reckless and desperate buccaneer, at last."

"True, Commodore Brainard, but a man who, in spite of his sins, had a noble heart," warmly said the youth.

"With the chief dead," continued Merle, "I was dragged on deck and again swung up with a rope around my neck; but, just then the lightning burst from the clouds, and striking the mainmast shivered it to splinters, while the men who held the rope were struck dead."

"Being in mid-air, I suppose, is all that saved my life, and, as it was, I fell to the deck partially stunned."

"But, recovering myself, I found that the wind had torn away the foremast, and the wreck of the mainmast, and that the schooner was a mere hulk upon the waters, while, to my surprise and delight, the frightened crew had rushed to the cabin, and were busy drinking the chief's wine and liquors, of which there was a very large supply on board."

Instantly the thought seized upon me to revenge myself upon my foes, and in a twinkling, I had closed and securely barred the cabin companionway, and then battened down the fore-castle and ward-room hatches.

"Every one, excepting myself and those killed by the lightning, were below, and arming myself from the bodies of the slain I awaited the result, while the storm increased and the sea washed the dead from the deck, broke the guns from their lashings, and I believed would swamp the wreck."

"Whenever the drunk and maddened crew below attempted to break up through the companionway, I fired down upon them and with good effect, for ere long they gave themselves up for lost and reveled in drunkenness."

"You know the rest, gentlemen: you hailed me, and I hoped you would come on board yesterday, as I became weaker and weaker."

"But who was it that replied to my hail, last night?" asked Captain Grenville, eagerly.

"It was one of the crew, sir, from the stern lights. I also replied, but my voice was too weak to reach you."

"Now, sir, I surrender myself, this wreck, and her crew to you," and Merle tendered the cutlass he held in his hand.

"My poor boy, you are not a prisoner, and I pardon you willingly, as you were not an intentional buccaneer; even had you been, your brave conduct would have gained you pardon from the President. Now, Grenville, let the men break open the cabin companionway, and we will see what style of demons we have below decks."

"Ay, ay, commodore," and Captain Grenville gave the order to his men, and the cabin-way was opened.

Instantly there rushed forth a score of wild-

eyed, haggard-faced beings, looking more like very devils than mortal men, and armed with cutlasses, pistols and knives, they hurled themselves upon the surprised and startled crew.

"Shoot them down! they are wild madmen, all of them," cried Captain Grenville, springing forward, and at once a desperate combat began, the buccaneers uttering wild shrieks and diabolical laughter, while they fought with the frenzy of fiends incarnate.

But the frigate's men doubled them in number, and, cool and fearless, gained the mastery, after a short and desperate conflict, and those of the buccaneers who were not slain were bound securely.

"Great God! this will turn the frigate into a lunatic asylum! Thank Heaven there are no more of them!" exclaimed Commodore Brainard, and then, led by Merle, they entered the cabin.

There a horrible sight met their view, and, brave as they were, those beholding it started back with a cry and a shudder.

The rich carpet was torn from the floor, and fifteen or twenty dead bodies lay in a heap, the tall form of Freelance surmounting the ghastly pile.

Bottles, broken and whole, strewed the floor, with arms of all kinds and nations, and upon several spirit casks, emptied of their contents, were dead men seated, tied into position, and holding in their nerveless hands musical instruments, as though playing upon them.

One held a violin, another a flute, and a third a Spanish guitar.

To the supposed music of this ghastly trio the mad revelers had danced around the dead pile of humanity, drinking, cursing, howling, singing and laughing, in wild glee, until human nature could stand no more, and one by one they would sink down to die.

The floor and walls were spattered with blood; the faces of the dead were blackening with decay, and their eyes were wide open, sightless, yet staring.

It was a desperate, soul-curdling sight, and no wonder those brave men shrunk back from that cabin, which had been the revel-chamber of maniacs.

At length Merle stepped into the death-den, and laid his hand upon the body of the chief.

"This is Captain Freelance," he said, quietly.

The dark face was turned toward them; the light fell full upon every bold, fearless feature, and the black eyes seemed to question them, though dead, while the tall, elegant form was visible in all its proportions.

With a bound Captain Grenville sprung forward, and dropping on his knees before the dead chief, cried in a voice of anguish:

"Great God! *this man is my brother!*"

CHAPTER VI.

THE VENDETTA.

LEAVING the death-haunted schooner rocking upon the deep blue sea, a strange scene enacted in her cabin, I will beg the kind reader to cast a retrospective glance with me to a time a number of years before the incidents related in the foregoing chapters of this story; which, though tinged with fiction, is based on reality, far more strange and true.

To a sunny southern land, whose shores are washed by the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, I would have the reader come with me and view a pleasant scene, upon a balmy afternoon, not very long after the close of the 1812 war with Great Britain.

A graceful brig-of-war is heading shoreward, under a cloud of canvas, and this is the only sail that dots the blue waters, whose waves spring up and burst in rainbow showers under the pressure of the sea breeze.

Along the shore are visible a number of plantation homes, half-embowered in the groves of orange, myrtle and magnolia trees, and, surrounded by broad piazzas, as they all are, and overlooking gardens of rare flowers and velvet lawns, they appear, just what they are, the abodes of the rich and refined, who have gathered around them every comfort and luxury that heart could desire.

A silence, inviting repose, brooded over the land, broken only by the shrill shriek of the eagle from his eyrie, or the splash of the alligator, as he plunged into his lair in some deep lagoon.

Upon a point of land jutting out from the main, and forming the arm of a small harbor, stood the handsomest of the houses along the shore—a white villa, large, rambling and beautifully situated, for from its wide porticoes could be viewed far up and down the coast, and inland, as the location was somewhat elevated above the surrounding country, and terminated in a cliff half a hundred feet in height, at the base of which the waves fell with heavy roar.

Upon the cliff was a rustic arbor, or summer-house, half hidden in vines, and a lovely retreat from which to view the Gulf, and the shores upon either side.

Within this arbor were two persons at the time of which I write, and their eyes were turned upon the coming vessel, a league distant, and heading toward the point of land.

The one was a maiden of eighteen, tall, graceful, and with a dark, rich, olive complexion, warmed by a sunny clime. Her eyes were dark, full of fire, and very large and beautiful, while in her manner there was an irresistible softness and fascination.

She was attired in a dress of soft, light material, and wore about her shoulders, a dark mantle of rich lace, which half concealed the outline of her exquisite form.

Her companion was a young man of perhaps twenty-one years of age, with a bold, frank air, and a face peculiarly prepossessing, while his form was above the medium height, and denoted strength and activity.

He was clad in the undress uniform of a junior officer in the United States Navy, and his jaunty cap was encircled by a gold cord.

"The brig comes bravely on, Helen; within the hour my brother will have landed, and then, sweet one, you will have to guard well your heart, for he is dangerously handsome and fascinating I assure you," and the young officer smiled at his fair companion, half seriously.

"Loving you as I do, Arthur, how can I ever love Launcelot, except as a sister should love a brother?" reproachfully said the maiden.

"I was but jesting, Helen; but indeed, Lance is a splendid fellow, and you will admire him:—a little wild, perhaps, and a restless wanderer, but with a heart true as steel."

"From boyhood I have always looked up to Lance as a protector, though he is but two years my senior; still he seems older, and after the death of father he took charge of the plantation. When I became a midshipman in the navy, Lance remained at home with mother, and would doubtless now be but a humdrum planter, had it not been—"

The young man paused, and the maiden, seeing that he did not continue, asked:

"Had it not been for what, Arthur? You remember I have lived here but six months, and know little of your neighborhood and its people, excepting what I have learned from you. But you look pained; perhaps I should not ask you more?"

"There is nothing that I will not tell you, Helen; you are my promised wife, and should know all regarding the name you will bear; but it is a painful subject to me."

"Then do not speak of it, Arthur."

"Yes, I may as well tell you now as in the future, and have it over with. Have you ever heard how my father died, Helen?"

"Papa told me he was killed in a duel, and said I must not speak of it."

"Yes, he fell by the hand of the man who owned yonder plantation—the fourth from here—see, the one adjoining my own home," and the young man pointed down the coast, to what had once been an elegant mansion, but was now wearing the badge of desertion and neglect.

"You refer to the Darrington estate?"

"Yes; the place of Colonel Ferd Darrington."

"It is deserted now, I have heard, and my maid, Chloe, says it is haunted," said Helen, with a slight shudder.

"Haunted by bitter memories, it certainly is, Helen, for four of its masters have fallen in a vendetta with my family, and three of my ancestors have also lost their lives confronting a Darrington, for a bitter feud exists between our name and theirs."

"It began long ago, and my great-grandmother, an heiress and a beauty, was the innocent cause. She loved my great-grandfather, and his rival, a Darrington, never forgave him, and shot him down, a few years after his marriage."

"That was the commencement of the vendetta, which offered up a life every few years, until my father fell by the hand of Colonel Ferd Darrington."

"Perhaps here it would have ended, for neither my brother Lance nor myself cared to keep up the red record, especially Lance, as he, I think, loved secretly the only child of the colonel, Lucille Darrington, whom in some way he had met, and who certainly returned that love."

"But Colonel Darrington was a bitter man, and one night met Lance face to face with his daughter, and the result was a challenge to my brother to meet him."

"That was five years ago, just after I left home to enter the navy; but from my mother I learned all."

"Lance accepted the challenge, and selected swords as the weapons, and, a splendid swordsman, disarmed the colonel; but it did not end here, and Colonel Darrington demanded a second meeting with pistols."

"It was granted and Lance received the fire of the colonel, who wounded him in the arm, but he fired in the air."

"This so infuriated his enemy, that the colonel stepped forward and struck Lance in the face with his glove."

"Of course this was too much for human nature, and especially Grenville human nature, to stand, and my brother challenged Ferd Darrington, determined to kill him, for he knew that the one whose life he had twice spared had killed our father."

"Eagerly Colonel Darrington accepted, chose

pistols as the weapons, and Lance shot him through the heart."

"Terrible! Oh! how terrible it must be to have one's life on your hands," said Helen Brainard, with deep feeling.

"But the tragedy did not end there, Helen; would to God it had; but what followed dwarfed the death of Ferd Darrington, as Lucille, when her father was brought home to her, dead, cursed my poor brother most bitterly, and that night took her own life—"

"A fearful sequel!"

"A fearful sequel indeed, Helen, and one that well-nigh killed poor Lance; but he struggled against his sorrow for awhile, and then left home, going to sea."

"Two years ago, when I was at home on leave, he returned; but only for a week, and now he is in yonder vessel, and its commander, for the service he rendered the Mexicans gained him rapid promotion."

"And does he intend to remain in the Mexican service, Arthur?"

"No, he writes me that he has resigned his commission, but the Government sent him home in the vessel he had commanded. He says he does not intend to leave home again as a wanderer, and I hope he will keep his word, for my mother is getting old now, and I am kept away so much he should be near to cheer her old age."

Helen Brainard seemed deeply impressed by all she had heard, and her thoughts were busy, as her eyes were turned upon the approaching brig, above the decks of which floated the Mexican flag.

Six months before Commodore Brainard had purchased and fitted up the elegant house where he then lived with his beautiful daughter, making it his retreat when not at sea, and it was here that Helen had first met Arthur Grenville, a young officer upon her father's vessel—met and loved him, as he had her, and the two were engaged with the consent of the commodore, who greatly admired the youthful lieutenant, and knew that in point of family and wealth he was second to no suitor in the land.

Sweeping up into the wind the brig of war lay to, and a boat put off from its side and headed shoreward.

"Boat ahoy!" called out Arthur Grenville, in a ringing voice.

The hail was heard by the one for whom it was intended, and in clear, manly tones came floating back over the waters:

"Ho, the cliff!"

"It is Launcelot's voice; yes, I recognize him in the stern-sheets," cried Arthur, eagerly, and raising his voice again, he called out:

"Lance Grenville, ahoy! come here!"

"Ay, ay, old fellow!" came back the answer, and the boat's course was at once changed.

At the landing, Arthur Grenville awaited his brother, and from the cliff above, Helen Brainard saw spring ashore the most magnificent specimen of manhood she had ever gazed upon.

Strangely like his brother in face, he was yet a handsome man, and his form was several inches taller, and his shoulders broader.

Though but two years the junior of Arthur, Lance Grenville looked much older, and his face was stern to somberness, and in his eyes was a look of constant sadness.

Attired in a stylish uniform, and with his darkly-bronzed face, Helen Brainard half-uttered the thought that flashed through her brain as she beheld Lance Grenville coming up the path toward where she stood:

"Have I made a mistake in believing that I loved Arthur?"

"Helen, this is my wandering brother, Captain Launcelot Grenville, of the Mexican Navy, come home to be a quiet planter; Lance, this is Miss Helen Brainard, my intended wife, and the sweetest girl on the Gulf shores."

Such was the introduction of the two, and the eyes of the man and maiden met—hers to fall beneath his earnest gaze, and his heart to give a great throb, as his hand clasped the one extended toward him in greeting.

"Helen, Lance has sent his traps, and his curiosities, on home in the boat, and will remain to dinner with your good father and myself, by my invitation, for I wish him to meet the gallant old commodore; then he will drive over with me in the evening to the plantation, where I know mother will scold us for not coming sooner; but she'll forgive us when she knows you kept us."

It was a pleasant party, the *quartette* who gathered in the dining-hall of the commodore's mansion that afternoon, and a sumptuous dinner, washed down by rare wines, with which the old sailor's cellar was well stored.

After dinner the carriage was ordered, and the commodore and Helen drove the brothers over to their home.

Knowing what she did of Lance Grenville's life, Helen Brainard glanced into his face as the vehicle rolled by the deserted mansion of the Darringtons, and beheld his eyes wander over the garden, to where glimmered in the light of the setting sun, a tall column of marble.

Well she knew that it arose above the Darrington tomb, and the pity in her heart for Lance Grenville was akin to love; a dangerous feeling in a woman's heart.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RIVALS.

SEVERAL weeks after the arrival of Lance Grenville, as he was generally called by his intimates, Helen Brainard sat in her own room alone, and in deep and painful meditation, for she had confessed to her own heart, that she loved the brother of the man to whom she was engaged.

Since his return home, Lance had settled down to a quiet plantation life, and resumed the charge of the Grenville estates. He seemed no longer the restless wanderer, and his mother believed, now, that she would keep him ever near her while she lived.

As she sat thus in her room in deep thought, Helen reviewed her meetings with Lance since his coming, and she felt that her love for him was returned, though no word of his had ever given her cause to feel that he cared for her, other than as the intended bride of his brother; still she read his heart, as often a woman can, when she is the one adored.

Fretted at the mistake she had made, in confessing her love for Arthur, with an impatient gesture Helen Brainard arose, and leaving her room, went out for a walk in the lonely grounds, for she needed action to keep off her painful reveries.

Mechanically she sought the path leading to the rustic arbor on the cliff, and threw herself down in a wicker chair, to gaze out over the sea.

"A rosebud for your thoughts, Miss Helen."

The maiden started at the voice, and beheld before her a young man, elegantly dressed, and with a face that would have been very handsome, had it not been marred by dissipation and recklessness.

In his hand he held a red rosebud, which he offered her in payment for the thoughts he had asked to know.

Before coming to her present home, Helen had met in New Orleans Rosal Abercrombie, who then stood before her.

He had come of good family, but at the death of his father, some years before, he had inherited a large estate, which his wild extravagances soon swamped in debt, and from him Commodore Brainard had purchased the elegant home in which he then lived.

With no mother's influence to guide his early years, for Mrs. Abercrombie had died when her boy was an infant, and reared by his father, a man wholly governed by his son, it was no wonder that Rosal became wild, recklessly extravagant and willful, and threw away his inheritance without thought of the future.

When all was nearly gone, and he was forced to sell his plantation home to pay his debts, Rosal Abercrombie met Helen Brainard, and from the first meeting loved her, and swore she should become his wife.

Admiring him much, the maiden had at first seemed to favor his suit; but after her father had purchased of the dissolute youth his home, and she had met Arthur Grenville, she no longer cared for Rosal, who, to do him justice, had given up his wild life, and upon the wreck of his fortune was living quietly in the village near his former abode.

Though he knew that the maiden was the promised wife of Arthur Grenville, Rosal Abercrombie did not despair of yet winning her, and was wont to often ride over to Landhaven, as the commodore had named his place, to see the object of his love.

"My thoughts were not of interest to you, Mr. Abercrombie; but be seated; I am glad you have come to drive them away, for they were not of the pleasantest," said Helen, quietly.

"Would that I could ever drive from you that which was unpleasant to you, Helen," remarked the young man, earnestly.

"Mr. Abercrombie, is this generous, is it honorable in you, when you know I am engaged to another?"

"Bah! engaged to one man and loving another," sneered the young profligate.

"What mean you, sir? If you intend to insult me, my father shall know of your impertinence," and Helen arose to her feet, an angry flush upon her cheeks.

"Helen Brainard, sit down! I wish to talk with you. Nay, do not exhibit anger, for, though becoming in a great degree, it is yet out of place with one who loves you as I do, and who would make you his wife."

"So you have often said, and as often have received my answer: I do not love you, Mr. Abercrombie."

"Still I would have you marry me, Helen."

"Yes, you would use me as a stepping-stone, to get back your old home, which you threw away by extravagance."

The man's brow darkened; but he answered, calmly:

"No, I would marry you because I love you; had I known you years ago I would not now be what I am."

"I love you, Helen, with all my soul, and would have you my wife, even though I believed you loved another."

"Your love is hopeless, Rosal," protested Helen, with some kindness in her tone; and then she added:

"I could not commit such a sin as to marry one man and love another."

"Then I suppose you will break your engagement with Arthur Grenville?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Simply that you love Lance Grenville, though engaged to Arthur."

"Again you insult me, sir, and upon my own land."

"If the truth offends, so be it; I tell you that which you dare not deny, and I would show you a way out of your present difficulty."

"I have read your secret, Helen Brainard, and I have read his secret love for you, and trouble hangs like a suspended knife above your head."

"Be warned, Helen, and cause not trouble between those two brothers; they are noble fellows, yet they are high-strung and passionate, and the secret will leak out, and the green-eyed monster, jealousy, may make one or the other of them a Cain."

"Break with them, Helen, and marry me."

The maiden gazed upon the man before her with a wild look in her eyes and a white face. She knew well that he spoke the truth.

And she dreaded that her secret might yet be known and then trouble would come.

She had not intended being untrue to Arthur; but it was her intention to keep her pledged word to him, and become his wife, even though Lance Grenville had fascinated her from her love for his brother.

Now she felt that her secret, hardly more than admitted to her own breast, was in the possession of a reckless man—one whom she felt loved her, and would gain her for his wife by fair means if he could, by foul means if he must.

It was no wonder then that she turned a frightened face toward Rosal Abercrombie, but her tongue would utter no word.

"You have heard me, Helen; in a week I will come for my answer."

"See, I offer myself to save you from doing that which may be a great crime."

"I offer you my whole love. I am not yet a beggar, for I have enough to live on, and for you I will work with every energy I possess. Farewell! In one week I will come for my answer."

The man turned, walked toward the mansion, and a moment after Helen saw him dash away on horseback, and a deep sigh escaped her lips.

"Poor Helen!"

The maiden started with a cry of alarm, and turned quickly.

Before her stood the tall, elegant form of Lance Grenville!

He was in hunting costume, buckskin suit, top-boots and slouch hat, and stood leaning upon the muzzle of his rifle.

The arbor was divided into three compartments—a center one, open seaward and landward, and here Helen had been seated when joined by Rosal Abercrombie.

Upon either side of this open hall were two small rooms—one used as a smoking and card-room, the other as a reading retreat for warm days.

In the doorway of the latter now stood Lance Grenville, his dark face stern and ashen, and his somber eyes still more sorrowful.

"Pardon me, Helen, for having been an eavesdropper—I was strolling along the beach, shooting water-fowl, became fatigued and came here to rest, expecting to disturb no one."

"I dropped off to sleep, lulled by the wash of the waves, and your voices in conversation awakened me, and I would have made my presence known had I not heard that which caused me to remain quiet, for I cared not that Rosal Abercrombie should know I was present. Am I pardoned for eavesdropping?"

"Yes; but oh! what have you not heard?" groaned the unhappy girl.

"I have heard that which would make me extremely happy, were my joy not purchased with my brother's misery."

"Did Rosal Abercrombie speak the truth, Helen, when he said you cared for me more than for Arthur?"

"He did."

"You confess it?"

"With humiliation, yes."

"It is not humiliating to confess one's love, Helen, for I tell you that I love you with my whole heart, now that the secret is no longer my own."

Helen gave a half-cry, as if of joy, of sorrow, and alarm mingled.

Before her stood the noble man who had just confessed his love for her.

But he drew not nearer to her; his rifle he had leaned against the door, and his arms were folded upon his broad breast.

For a moment a deep and painful silence followed his words.

Then Lance Grenville continued slowly and in his strangely soft tones:

"It is a great joy, Helen, to know that you love me, and yet it is a sorrow unspeakable, for it comes from the lips of one who is betrothed to one dearer to me than all other men—my brother Arthur."

"For me you feel but a passing fancy, a fas-

cination that will fade away as soon as I am gone from here, and your noble breast will go back to its first allegiance, and you will wonder how it could have strayed into forbidden fields.

"But, once again, ere I leave you, Helen, let my ears drink in the sweet words, and my heart clasp close this phantom love; tell me you love me, and if it were not for Arthur, that you would be my wife."

"I love you, Lance Grenville," passionately said the maiden, advancing toward him.

But he held her off, and said in a low voice: "No; your lips are sacred to him. If my brother were to die I would claim you then, but not while he lives."

"Helen Brainard, farewell forever."

Quickly the strong man turned, and walked away down the cliff path, and, her heart wrung with anguish, Helen Brainard threw herself upon the floor, and leaning upon the wicker chair buried her face in her hands.

CHAPTER VIII.

CAIN ACCURSED.

SOBBING bitterly, Helen Brainard remained some time in her perfect abandon of grief.

Then she started, for a light touch fell upon her shoulder.

"Ah, Lance," she burst forth, "I knew that you would not leave me thus."

"It is not Lance, Helen."

With a bound, like an enraged lioness, Helen Brainard was upon her feet.

Before her stood Arthur Grenville!

"You! you have heard my words, sir?" she said, savagely.

"I behold you here in great grief, Helen. Your father told me I would find you here, and I heard you speak the name of my brother in strange tones. His rifle stands there, and I saw him going up the beach, a moment since."

"What does it all mean, Helen?"

The maiden made no reply, and after a moment Arthur Grenville continued:

"I will speak for you, Helen, and not in anger will I say a word."

"You will remember when we stood together here, and awaited the coming of my brother?"

"Yes," broke from the white lips.

"Then I told you, half in earnest, for I seemed to feel a presentiment of coming evil, not to fall in love with Lance."

"Shall I tell you, Helen, that I have lately seen that such has been the case?"

"Yes, Helen, you love my brother, and not me."

Still the maiden uttered no word, and the man went on:

"I rode over this afternoon to break my engagement with you, and to say good-by—"

"No, no, no, do not leave me, Arthur!" groaned the unhappy girl.

"Yes, I intended to rejoin my ship at once, and beg to be sent cruising in the southern waters after buccaneers, and never to return, until you were the wife of Lance Grenville, for I know how well you two love each other."

"No, no, Arthur! I do not love him; you only do I love, and I swear it."

"My regard for him was adoration—fascination."

"You mistake, Helen; you love Lance, as he does you, and our engagement is at an end."

"Henceforth you are but as a sister to me."

The maiden stretched forth her hands beseechingly toward him, and her lips moved; but no word came from them—her heart was almost breaking with the intensity of her feelings.

"Helen, I dare not touch your hand; I dare not—yes, for this once only, and it is my farewell to love."

Springing forward he seized her in his strong arms—pressed her an instant to his breast, kissed her lips once, twice, thrice, and then turned away; turned away, not seeing that she had sunk in a heap upon the floor of the arbor, wholly unconscious.

With rapid steps Arthur Grenville sought the mansion, sprung upon his waiting horse, and dashed swiftly away, just as the sun went down in the blue waters of the gulf.

An hour after sunset, Lance Grenville returned to his elegant home, where his mother was awaiting tea for him.

He looked pale and haggard, and glancing anxiously into his stern face, his mother inquired if he were ill.

"No, mother; bodily I am all right; but heart and brain are suffering," he answered, bitterly.

"My poor, poor boy," said the fond mother, remembering how he had suffered in the past, after the death of Colonel Darrington by his hand, and the suicide of poor Lucille.

"Mother!"

"Well, Launcelot?" and Mrs. Grenville was almost frightened at the tone of her son's voice.

"It is useless trying; I cannot remain here; I will leave home once more."

"Not soon, I trust, Launcelot?" said the mother, her heart sinking with dread.

"Yes, to-morrow; ay, to-night—within the hour," he announced, earnestly.

"And whither would you go, my son?"

"Anywhere, everywhere! back to Mexico, and again take command of a cruiser."

"Does not David sail to-night for New Orleans with marketing?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then I shall go with him; I will at once pack my trunk, so please send word not to let the lugger sail without me."

"But you will miss seeing Arthur?" said Mrs. Grenville, trying by some ruse to detain him if she could.

"He went over to Landhaven, I suppose?"

"Yes, Lance."

"Then he will not return until late; bid him good-by for me," and the unhappy man left the tea-room.

In an hour's time he returned, dressed for traveling, and accompanied by a negro servant bearing his trunk.

Sorrowing for her son, whom she believed was flying from the cruel memories that haunted him when at home, Mrs. Grenville bade him farewell with many tears, and entreaties not to remain long away from her.

"I am getting old fast, Lance; see, my hair is white now, and ere long you will have no mother."

"The sorrows I have had, have left their impress here," and she laid her hand upon her heart.

"If you remain away long, my son, you will find no welcome from me upon your return, for I will be sleeping yonder," and she pointed to a grove of trees at the other end of the garden, where, for generations, the Grenvilles had been laid in their last resting place.

"If you die, mother, I shall never return home; you are the only anchor that I have to hold me here," and he drew his mother toward him, imprinted a kiss upon the silver hair and was gone.

With quick, heavy step he walked down toward the landing, a few hundred yards distant, followed by the servant bearing his traps.

At a small pier lay a lugger, a plantation trading-boat, the sails up, and the negro crew, of three men, awaiting his coming.

"Well, Dave, I am to be your passenger to New Orleans."

"So missis sent word, massa, an' I has had the cabing fixt up as nice as possible," said the black skipper, politely, then he added: "I'se sorry to see you goin' away so soon, sah."

"I must go, Dave; but I will remain on deck, on a blanket, if I care to sleep, for the night is too beautiful to go into the cabin," and Lance Grenville glanced out over the moonlit waters, for a full moon rode in the cloudless heavens.

"Are you ready now, Dave?"

"Yes, sah, if you is, massa."

"Then cast off, for I am most anxious to be away," impatiently said Lance Grenville, and the lugger was slowly swung round to catch the breeze.

"Hold on there with that craft! put back to the wharf, or I will fire on you!"

The words were loud and determined, and issued from the lips of a horseman, who dashed down to the pier, followed by a score of companions, also mounted.

"Put back, Dave; you have not been stealing, I hope," said Lance Grenville, calmly.

"No, sah; but dat am de new sheriff, sah, sartain."

In another moment the lugger was again alongside the pier, and Lance Grenville sprang ashore, and asked, sternly:

"Of what has my servant been guilty, gentlemen, that you come after him, mounted and armed?"

"It is not your servant we are after, Captain Grenville, but yourself," answered sheriff Winston, laying his hand upon the arm of the young man.

"Indeed! of what am I accused?" sneeringly demanded Lance Grenville.

"You are guilty of as base a crime as—"

The man said no more, for a blow, fair in the face, laid him his length upon the ground.

"Hold! Lance Grenville, you cannot escape," and a dozen pistols were leveled upon him.

"I seek not to escape; I but punished one who said I was guilty of a base crime; of what am I accused?"

He turned haughtily upon those who confronted him.

Then one dismounted and stepped toward him; it was Rosal Abercrombie.

"Lance, my poor friend, the charge against you, is a severe one, and I trust it can be proven false."

"Name it, sir."

"Murder."

"Murder! Who have I murdered?" and Lance spoke half-earnestly, half-laughingly.

"Your brother, Arthur!"

As the last name issued from the lips of Rosal Abercrombie, the hand of Launcelot Grenville was upon his throat, and he was hurled back with a force that nearly stunned him.

"Liar! wretch! you dare make that charge against me?"

"It is a severe charge, Captain Grenville, and it remains with you to prove it untrue," said an old planter, coming forward.

"Arthur, my brother, Arthur dead?"

"He is, sir."

"Who killed him?"

"You are accused of his murder."

"I! why should I kill poor Arthur?"

"Captain Grenville," and the sheriff approached, cautiously: "Captain Grenville, I am very sorry, sir, but it is my duty, sir, to arrest you upon the charge of murder, and I must iron you, as already we know how violent you can be."

The head of the proud man dropped on his breast, and a deep groan broke from his lips, as he stood a moment in silence.

Then he said, calmly, facing his accusers, and holding his wrists together:

"Do your duty, sir."

The manacles were clasped upon his wrists, and the party set off for the mansion.

As they ascended the broad steps of the piazza another deep sorrow fell upon the prisoner—a sorrow almost greater than he could bear.

At the door a servant met him, and from his lips broke the words:

"Massa Lance, your poor mother am dead."

"Dead! my mother dead, too?"

He spoke like one in his sleep.

"Yes, sah; when de gemmans comed an' tole her how you had kill Massa Art'ur, den she lay down on de sofa an' die," said the old negro, the *factotum* of the Grenville mansion, when his young masters were little boys.

With a groan from his inmost heart, Launcelot Grenville sunk down in a chair, and buried his face in his manacled hands.

CHAPTER IX.

A STRANGE COMPACT.

"I HAVE come for my answer, Helen."

Helen Brainard sat alone in the sea-view arbor on the cliff, and her eyes were looking fixedly out over the sunlit waters of the Gulf, though they apparently saw nothing, as she seemed lost in bitter thought.

Her face was blanched, her eyes deep-sunken, and her haggard looks proved that she had suffered, in the week that had passed, since she last sat in that arbor, and was left there in a deep faint by Arthur Grenville.

Like a lightning stroke, the news had come upon her, that Arthur Grenville was dead, and that his brother was his murderer!

For days she had lain in a kind of demi-stupor, conscious, yet uttering no word; but at last she had left her room, and, to her father's delight, had joined him at breakfast that very morning, a week from the day of the murder.

As though determined to shut out the past, she had gone about her duties with a quiet manner, for she was her father's housekeeper, and then she sat down to the piano and idly ran her fingers over the keys; but the air she started, drifted off into a dirge, and seizing her unfinished novel, she walked out toward the arbor.

But not to read, for bitter memories thronged upon her, and her face soon became as cold as marble; but in her eyes dwelt a strange light.

"I have come for my answer, Helen."

The maiden did not start; she knew who addressed her, and she said, quietly:

"I am glad you have come, Mr. Abercrombie; I wish to talk with you."

A bright look crossed the man's face, and entering the arbor he seated himself upon a *settee*.

"From my heart I pity you, Helen."

"Do you?" was the calm reply.

"Indeed I do; it came so soon, so unexpectedly upon you."

"You are without a rival now?"

It was half-assertion, half a question, and there was a sneer in her tone.

"Yes; one dead, and one in prison and as well as doomed—this is why I came to beg you to let me have the right to comfort you in your sorrow."

"The world need not know; only give me the promise that you will become my wife. I told you I would return in one week, and, though I knew your sorrow was overwhelming, I have come."

The man pleaded earnestly, and his voice trembled.

After a silence of a moment, Helen said:

"I am glad you have come, for I would learn from you all about this cruel murder."

"From me! Why, did not your father tell you all?" asked Rosal, in surprise.

"He told me that Arthur Grenville had fallen by the hand of his brother; that was all I then cared to know. Now I will hear all from you."

"I will make known all that I can tell of the sad affair, Helen, in which, unfortunately, I was forced to take a too conspicuous part."

"You!" and the eyes turned earnestly upon his face.

"Yes; the word first came to me of the murder."

"I am listening," as Rosal Abercrombie paused.

"Well, you know I left you here, the other afternoon, and I rode down the beach to the cabin of old Beal, the fisherman, intending to engage him and his craft for a day's sport."

"I did not find Beal at home, and on returning met him, just after dark, a mile from here, at the White Cliff, and he held in his hand a dark object, which he informed me was a coat."

"I took it, and by the bright moonlight rec-

ognized it as the coat worn by Arthur Grenville, and, from Beal, I learned that a terrible tragedy had taken place.

"He was off shore fishing in his small boat, and at sunset saw a horseman ride out upon the cliff, and he recognized Arthur Grenville, who seemed to be gazing seaward, as though in search of a sail.

"A moment, he said, that Arthur remained there, and then he saw him fall from his horse, and the report of a rifle reached his ears.

"He was so surprised at what he beheld that he remained motionless, and then by the light of the rising moon, he saw a tall form run out upon the cliff, from the pine thicket, and bend over the body of Arthur Grenville.

"A moment he remained thus, and then he arose, bearing the body in his arms, and hurled it from the cliff into the sea.

"For awhile he stood after the deed, and then walked rapidly back to the pine thicket, and Beal next beheld him dash away upon a white horse.

"Then the fisherman remained inactive no longer, and hastily rowed shoreward, and searched for the body, but without success, and going upon the cliff he found the coat, hat and boots of Arthur Grenville, for such I recognized them to be.

"From this description of the murderer, 'a very tall man, riding a white horse,' I felt that it must be Lance Grenville, for you know I had dreaded trouble."

"Yes, your forebodings were quickly realized. What did you then do, Rosal?"

There was a strange calmness in the manner and tone of the woman, and Rosal Abercrombie doubted if she had loved Arthur Grenville as well as he had believed, or his brother at all.

"I felt it my duty to cause the arrest of Lance Grenville, and I sought the sheriff, while Beal went after several of the planters, and we met at the residence of the Grenvilles, and, to add to our suspicions, learned that Lance had just left home for an indefinite period, going by the market lugger to New Orleans.

"While several of the party remained at the mansion, to acquaint the poor mother with the sad tidings, we dashed down to the pier, and captured the murderer, but not until he had knocked the sheriff down, and roughly handled me."

"Poor Mrs. Grenville! How terrible must have been her sorrow!"

"Her sorrows were soon at an end; she died from the shock, as you know she had heart-disease."

Helen Brainard started, and her form trembled violently, for she had dearly loved the noble old lady to whose son she had been betrothed.

After a long silence, which Rosal Abercrombie would not interrupt, Helen asked:

"And Launcelot Grenville is in prison now?"

"Yes, he is in the village jail, doubly ironed."

"When will he be tried?"

"In two weeks."

"There is no proof that Lance Grenville is the murderer."

"Yes, he was seen by Beal, and—"

"How far off was Beal?"

"Well, say two hundred yards from the shore."

"Did he say that it was Lance Grenville did the deed?"

"What a Yankee you are for questions, Helen! He said it was a very large man, and that he rode away on a white horse, after throwing the body into the sea."

"The body was never found, was it?"

"No; it drifted out with the tide, and the beach, for miles, has been searched in vain for it."

"The description of the murderer answers to Lance Grenville, certainly; still it may not have been, and a court will ask many questions before he is condemned on that evidence."

"You need offer no excuse for the man you love, Helen, for—"

"Silence, sir! I tell you that better evidence must be found to hang Lance Grenville, and Rosal Abercrombie, you must find it!"

"Great God!"

The man was on his feet in an instant; but the maiden was perfectly serene, a strange smile upon her lips, a stranger look in her eyes.

"In God's name what do you mean, Helen Brainard?"

"Just what I say, sir; you must find evidence that will hang Lance Grenville for the murder of his brother Arthur."

"I thought you loved Lance Grenville!" gasped the man, inquiringly.

"I thought so, too; it was a fascination, an infatuation."

"And Arthur Grenville?"

"Was my first, last and only love."

The maiden spoke with painful earnestness, and looked the man before her squarely in the face.

"You have just found this out?"

"Yes, when he is dead, and his brother is his murderer."

And you wish now to have Lance Grenville—"

"Hung!"

The eyes fairly blazed now, and the lips were bloodless; the man was fairly frightened.

"Rosal Abercrombie, I hate Lance Grenville as fervently as I loved his brother, and I am revengeful, and he must die, and you must supply the evidence necessary to condemn him."

"I know not how."

"I will show you. Go into that arbor, look behind the door, and then tell me what you discover."

The man quietly obeyed, and returning, said in a whisper:

"It is Lance Grenville's rifle."

"Yes; he left it here one week ago to-day—can it not be made use of?"

"How?"

"See if it is loaded."

"It is not," said Rosal, after an examination.

"It was fired last a week ago, then cannot an expert tell by examination if a firearm has just been discharged, or—"

"Yes, I understand; tell me your plan," said the man, an evil look creeping into his eyes.

"If you found the rifle near the White Cliffs—hidden in the fine straw, and—"

"Helen Brainard, you are a very devil for plotting! This evidence will be sufficient to hang him."

"It may, and it may not; there must be more."

"How and when can I get it?"

"See the prosecuting attorney, and tell him that, in my grief, I said to you that my testimony would hang Lance Grenville, if I gave it."

"Your testimony?"

"Yes; one week ago Lance Grenville stood where you do now, and said to me that which I will make known before a court, if I am called as a witness."

"You shall be there; but your revenge against Lance is fearful."

"I hate as I love—with my whole soul; now take the rifle and go."

"And my reward?—for I do this for you alone, Helen."

"The day that Lance Grenville is sentenced to be hung, I will pledge myself to become your wife, upon any day after one year from Arthur Grenville's death that you will name."

"By Heaven! do you mean it?" and a look of triumph shot into the eyes of the man.

"I do, and with me you will get back this, your old home, and the bones of your ancestors, which you sold to my father."

The sneer in the words caused Rosal Abercrombie to turn deadly pale; but he said, as calmly as he could:

"You will love me then, Helen?"

"No; that is not in my compact with you—I loved Arthur Grenville living, and I love his memory now; I will hate you, but I will be your wife."

"Enough; I am content with my compact. I will indeed be envied, for the world will only see that my bride is in the image of an angel, and not behold that she has the heart of a devil."

"True, but you will know me as I am—as I know you, Rosal Abercrombie. Good-evening, sir," and the revenge-crazed woman swept haughtily from the arbor, while Rosal Abercrombie took up the tell-tale rifle, muttering to himself:

"Ay, my beauty, I will be revenged on you, too, for casting me aside for Arthur Grenville. Yes, I will gain my beautiful wife, and her golden dower, and once again have back the home of my forefathers."

"Ha! ha! ha! Helen Brainard, two can play at the game of revenge, as you shall know."

CHAPTER X.

GUILTY!

THE morning, upon which the trial of Lance Grenville, for the murder of his brother, commenced, broke bright and balmy, and the little village in which was the court-house and jail, was crowded overwhelmingly, as early as sunrise.

At the appointed hour, the prisoner and his counsel came into the court-house, the judge took his seat, the jury of twelve men was impaneled, and the trial began.

The fisherman, Henry Beal, was the first called, and he told his story in a straight way, as it is already known to the reader, and never swerved from it, when under the cross-examination of the defendant's lawyers.

Then came Rosal Abercrombie, pale as death, and deeply pained to have to testify against his friend, Lance Grenville; but he was forced to speak out, and tell how he had met Beal, the fisherman, and had suspected Lance Grenville of being the murderer, from the fact that it was a large man who did the deed, and was mounted upon a white horse; also, he said, he had discovered that the prisoner loved the lady to whom his brother was engaged.

Then he told how he had visited the scene of the murder a week after, and the sunlight shining on a bright object had caught his eye, and, pushing aside the fine straw, he had found the discharged rifle that all knew as belonging to Lance Grenville.

The prisoner's face here flushed, but he made

no other sign that he heard the testimony against him; he was calm to indifference, and his face wore the same somber look that it always had resting upon it, except when in conversation.

The rifle was exhibited in court, and many recognized it as the weapon of the prisoner.

Several other witnesses were then brought forward, who testified to the flight of Lance Grenville the night of the murder, and his resistance to the sheriff, and his attack on Rosal Abercrombie, for the acts of the prisoner on that occasion, were now, under the charge against him, interpreted as an attempt to beat off his captors.

Then the last witness came to the stand—a woman.

It was Helen Brainard, leaning on the arm of her father.

She was in deep mourning, and when she threw back her veil, her face was as white as marble, and all pitied her.

In a slow tone, yet fearfully distinct in utterance, she answered the questions put to her by the attorneys:

"You knew the prisoner well?"

"I did."

"Were you betrothed to his brother, Arthur Grenville?"

"I was."

"Did the prisoner ever tell you that he loved you?"

"He did."

"When?"

"The day of the murder."

"Did he make any threats against his brother?"

"He did not."

"I have been told that in your grief you made use of this expression:

"'Lance Grenville is guilty, for he asked me if his brother were dead would I become his wife.' Did you say this?"

"I fear I did, in my great grief at what had occurred."

"Did he ask you 'if his brother were dead would you become his wife?'"

"Yes."

The answer came faintly, yet was heard by all.

Still Lance Grenville made no sign that he heard; his stern face hid every emotion he felt, for he mourned a brother, whom it was said his hand had slain; he mourned for his poor dead mother; had lost forever the woman of his love, and the gallows loomed up baldly before him.

It was a terrible strain upon him—yet he showed no sign that he suffered.

The attorneys defending the prisoner seemed now to lose hope; but they struggled for his life nobly, and the case was given over to the jury.

Without leaving their seats they returned the verdict:

"Guilty!"

Still no change in that marble face, until the words of the judge in his sentence—"hung by the neck until dead—dead—dead!"

Then a flush, as though of shame, crossed brow and cheeks, and the doomed man was led away—led back to his lonely cell to await his death upon the gallows.

Slowly the days dragged their weary length along to the condemned man; but he had no hope in life, and he longed that the end might come; in the grave he would find rest, and then, some day in the far future, it would be found that he had been falsely accused; that he was not the Cain-accursed man a jury of his peers had pronounced him.

At length the day of execution rolled around, and between pity, morbid curiosity and idleness, hundreds were present to behold the sickening spectacle of a man hung like a dog by the neck, by his Christian fellow-men—to see blood washed away with more blood; to behold a legal murder, called justice, and winked at by society and the church, whose prayers waft the silent criminal into "eternal joy beyond the grave."

God in Heaven! where is the difference, whether twelve men kill a fellow-being by strangling him with a rope, quietly, calmly, cruelly condemn him to die, or one man, in the frenzy of passion, for hate, or for wrongs done him, or even for gold and gain, kills another?

I ask where is the difference—which the greater sin?

The question is open to all lovers of capital punishment!

With blanched face, but fearless mien and steady tread, Launcelot Grenville ascended the gallows to meet his doom, gazed upon by the gaping crowd.

Waving back the minister who approached him, as though it were mockery to hold prayer there, and for him, a Cain-accursed man, he motioned to the sheriff that he was ready, and calmly faced his silent and attentive audience.

The fatal noose was adjusted by the willing sheriff, who had not forgotten that blow in the face, given him the night of the arrest, and the words of doom were nearly spoken, when the clatter of hoofs was heard, and a horseman dashed up like the wind, the crowd moving right and left to let him pass, eager for news, eager for still greater excitement, and wonder ing; some were hoping.

But the horseman drew his splendid white steed back at the gallows steps, and a cry broke from his lips:

"Fore God! please let me tole my poor massa goo'-by."

It was only a negro—the slave of the doomed man.

It was Dave, the captain of the market lugger.

None had the heart to refuse him, and he sprung up the steps, eagerly pushing aside all who opposed him, in his excitement, and rushed to the side of Lance Grenville, half-clasping him in his arms, and muttering words unheard by the crowd.

Whatever those words were, they had a magic effect on the prisoner—his arms were unpinioned, the cut rope falling at his feet, and in each hand was a double-barreled pistol.

Springing forward, he hurled the sheriff from the gallows platform to the ground, and with a mighty bound he was upon the back of his own steed.

"Stand aside, all!"

In ringing tones the words broke from the prisoner's lips, and the animal he bestrode bounded wildly forward.

There was a wild shout, several attempts at capture, the rattle of firearms, and the white steed was off like the wind, a crimson stream pouring down his white flank, but still bearing his master on.

In mad haste the officers of the law started in pursuit; but none were mounted, and the fugitive gained rapidly, and soon disappeared in the forest.

But the crowd pressed on, and after a hard run reached the beach, whither the fugitive had gone.

There they beheld the Grenville lugger, known to be the fastest sailer on the coast, standing off and on, half a mile from the shore, and a small boat pulling swiftly toward it.

At the oars were two negroes, tugging hard, and in the stern sat Launcelot Grenville, his hand upon the tiller.

Upon the beach, beneath the shadow of the white cliffs, lay the steed—foam-covered, blood-stained and dead.

Still looking, and powerless to prevent, the spectators beheld the boat reach the lugger, and the fugitive and oarsmen spring on board.

Then the boat was cast adrift, and the swift lugger stood down the coast, heading close in toward Landhaven Point, the home of Commodore Brainard.

The cause of this move was soon known to the lookers-on.

A horseman rode like the wind along the beach, sprung from his steed, seized a small skiff, and went flying out to head off the lugger, which he soon boarded.

It was Dave, the slave who had saved his master's life.

"Captain Dave," as he was called, who had fearlessly and skillfully plotted to save Launcelot Grenville from the gallows, and had successfully carried out his plot, and, when he saw, as he had expected, that he was forgotten in the excitement of the prisoner's escape, he had fled for his life, and mounting a horse he had placed in waiting, had ridden away to reach the lugger down the coast.

In the few words, spoken on the gallows, Dave had told his plot, severed the bonds of the prisoner, placed the pistols in his hands, and, with the reckless courage of his nature, Lance Grenville had saved himself from an ignominious death.

CHAPTER XI.

ARTHUR GRENVILLE'S STORY.

I WILL now return to the schooner, which had become a charnel-house, as it were, through the mad revel of her imprisoned crew.

When Captain Arthur Grenville's startling cry made known that Freelance the Buccaneer was his own brother, the unfortunate and unhappy Lance, Commodore Brainard stepped quickly forward and gazed fixedly at the dark, stern face of the dead chief.

"Before God! it is indeed your brother!" he exclaimed, and then he gave orders to have the body prepared for burial, while the dead buccaneers were thrown into the sea.

A moment did Captain Grenville kneel in silent grief, and then he arose, his face pale and full of sorrow.

"Poor Lance! to think such should be his end!"

"Commodore Brainard, he had a noble heart, and it was his terrible sufferings that drove him to this."

"Launcelot Grenville, my brother, Freelance the Buccaneer. It is indeed hard to believe," and he gazed upon the dead form, as his men bore it from the cabin, and forgetting his own sufferings, Merle the waif turned in pity upon him.

"He told me, sir, that circumstances, over which he had no control, made him a pirate, and he seemed so glad that I had saved your life," said the youth, quietly.

"Yes, he ever loved me as I loved him, as I love his memory now."

"Fools! did they think that Lance could

raise hand against my life?" angrily said Arthur Grenville, referring to those who had, long years before, condemned him to death for a murder that had not been committed.

"Some time, my young friend, I will tell you the whole sad story of how he was wronged; but now let us to duty, for action will drown my thoughts."

"I suppose you know all that the schooner contains?"

"Yes, sir; there is considerable booty on board, and a quantity of gold and jewels—I have the key to the iron chest, which is here," and Merle placed his foot upon a trap-door in the floor.

"The booty must go to the frigate's crew; to what you wish help yourself."

"And the papers and private property of the chief, sir, I will turn over to you."

"I thank you," said Captain Grenville, sadly, and opening the trap-door a chest was revealed, bound with iron.

This Merle also unlocked, and a rich treasure was before the eyes of the three, for Commodore Brainard was also present; it was the accumulation of years of crime—gold and jewels equal to many thousands of dollars.

"Boy, take that which you desire," said Commodore Brainard.

The youth took up a broad band of gold, in which was set a single diamond of imperial size and beauty.

"This I have often seen Captain Freelance wear; I will take it in remembrance of him—it is all I care for," and he placed the ring upon the little finger of his left hand.

"Here is an inlaid box of rare workmanship. See, it is addressed to you!" and Captain Grenville handed the box to the youth, who eagerly glanced at the superscription.

It was addressed as follows:

"A LEGACY TO
"MERLE THE WAIF
"FROM

"FREELANCE THE BUCCANEER."

The box was locked, and no key was found to fit it, so the youth placed it aside, to await a more fitting opportunity to open it.

A bundle of papers marked with the chief's name—"Launcelot Grenville," were taken by his brother Arthur, who also appropriated a watch, which he knew had been the property of his brother, long years before.

Commodore Brainard then selected some costly trinket from the store before him, and the chest was locked and turned over to the frigate's purser, the contents to be divided as prize-money, upon arrival of the vessel in port.

The rich booty in the schooner's hold was then transferred to the frigate, and carpenters were set to work upon the buccaneer craft, and by sunset jury-masts had been rigged, sails bent, and the little craft was manned with a crew, Captain Grenville himself taking command, and keeping Merle on board with him.

Shortly after dark the frigate and her prize set sail for Pensacola, to which port the former vessel had been destined when led off her course in pursuit of the buccaneer, who often before had cleverly eluded his large and powerful foe.

That night in the schooner's cabin, fitted up for their accommodation, Arthur Grenville and Merle sat together.

The former was looking over the private papers left by his dead brother: the latter had opened the little box and was examining its contents.

A few moments only had passed since Arthur Grenville had ceased speaking; he had been telling the youth of the sad story of the past, and how Lance Grenville had been sinned against, when charged with his murder.

With angry brow and ringing tone he had said:

"My brother accused of taking my life! Curses upon those who thus accused him, though I must confess that appearances were fearfully against him."

"But the very day that Lance escaped from the gallows, I arrived at home to confront his accusers; I arrived to find that, in flying from the hangman, he had shot dead the very man who had brought the misery upon him, and who had attempted to check his flight by seizing his bridle-rein."

"It was a low villain—an old fisherman, by the name of Beal, whom, when mere boys, my brother and myself had caught selling liquor to our negroes, and had severely punished."

"He had then sworn to be revenged upon us, and fearfully he kept his word, though he lost his life by my brother's hand—a just retribution."

"To to that wretch I owe it, that I now mourn my brother dead, and a buccaneer chief—the noted Freelance; to that wretch I owe it, for much misery he made me suffer, for it was his hand that struck me down upon the cliff that fatal night; it was his hand that stripped me of a part of my clothing and left it on the cliff, while I was carried out to sea in his little boat, still unconscious by the blow upon my head which he had dealt me, for when he approached I dreaded no harm."

"Yes, it was Beal, the fisherman, who bound me hand and foot, and tied to my feet a heavy anchor, and cast me into the sea."

"But he had not counted upon two things; I was not dead, as he believed, and my feet and hands, fortunately, are remarkably small," and with a grim smile Arthur Grenville held up those members to view.

Then, after a moment's silence, he continued: "I sunk down deep, very deep, when he threw me into the sea; but the cold water revived me, and after a hard struggle I slipped my hands through the ropes that bound my wrists, freed my feet, and rose to the surface, nearly dead from exhaustion."

"Out on the moonlit waters, I saw my foe rowing shoreward rapidly; but I dare not call to him, so I floated until I was fully rested; then I struck out for the land."

"But the tide had been running out, and I was miles away, and gave up all for lost; but I struggled on for life, and soon a vessel passed near and the crew heard my hail, and I was taken on board, more dead than alive."

"It was days before I was able to tell my story, and I then found we were far north on our way to Portland, Maine."

"At length the vessel reached port, and at once I set out upon my return home, where I arrived the day of my brother's escape from the gallows, and found my foe, Beal, the fisherman, beyond my revenge."

"But, my young friend, there is one thing that I could never find out—one mystery I could never solve, and that is, who was the comrade of Beal in his act of villainy against my brother and myself, for that he had a confederate I am certain; the whole plot was too well arranged and carried out, to come from his thick brain. One of these days I may know."

"And Captain Free—I mean your brother, never wrote home after his flight?" asked Merle.

"No, we never knew, for years, what had become of him; the negro crew of the lugger had run him over to the mouth of the Mississippi river and there he caught an outward-bound vessel, and they returned home, brave fellows, only when they heard of my arrival."

"And that was the last you ever heard of him?"

"No, I saw, when cruising in the Mediterranean, that an English packet-ship had been captured by a Moorish corsair, and among the names of those slain, was that of Lance Grenville, hence I believed him dead, and thus mourned for him."

"His was indeed a sad fate, and now that he is dead, his virtues, not his sins, shall be remembered by me."

"You are a noble boy, and as you were the protegee of my brother, so shall you be of mine."

"I will give up the sea now, and return to my home on the Gulf, and you must go with me. Don't say me nay, for I am unmarried; she, who was the innocent cause of the sorrows that fell upon Lance and myself, is now the wife of one of my boyhood friends—Rosal Abercrombie; she married him a year after the flight of my brother, and I hope she is happy."

"We will see her when we return home, for my friendship with her father carries me often to her home; but all the old love I felt for her is utterly gone—utterly gone," and Arthur Grenville seemed musing with the past.

After a while he said, earnestly, as if awaking from a painful dream:

"But you did not answer me; you will go with me to my home, and be as my own son?"

"Yes, sir, for I have nowhere else in the wide world to go—none to care for me," and he spoke in a tone of deep sadness, that touched his companion greatly.

Then he turned and resumed his examination of the little box, left him by Captain Freelance.

Suddenly he sprung to his feet, his face flushed, and in a trembling voice cried, excitedly:

"This will explain much, sir," that you and I should know. I have here a written confession of the life of Launcelot Grenville; it incloses this miniature—see!" and Merle held up a small miniature in a double frame of massive gold, the rim set with diamonds.

It contained two likenesses, superbly executed—one of a young man, the other of a maiden.

Upon the back of one was engraven the name of "Launcelot," upon the other the name of "Zulah."

"It is my brother's likeness, taken many years ago, and it is in the Moorish uniform; how strange!"

Then Arthur Grenville glanced at the other likeness, and said, slowly:

"It is a woman's face and oh! how beautiful! Who can she be?"

"Her costume is Persian, sir," said Merle.

"You are right; your letter may explain the mystery—read it!"

The youth turned again to the box and took therefrom the closely written letter, or confession; beneath it, wrapped in soft silk, was a large anchor of princely rubies, set in gold, and suspended to a necklace of immense diamonds, each one worth a small fortune—there were fifty of these precious, flawless stones, the same number as the rubies forming the blood-red anchor.

Another neck-chain of massive gold, evidently belonging to the miniature, lay in the box, and taking it up, Merle clasped upon it the diamond and ruby-studded likenesses he yet held in his hands, which had for him a fascination far more powerful than the costly necklace and anchor.

One other article the box contained—a long, slender poniard of purest steel, incased in a gem-set scabbard of gold; but the handle of the blade was the most remarkable, as it was in the shape of an anchor, each side set with rubies; the flukes of the anchor served as the guard of the knife, and the setting was massive and secure.

Like one in a dream, Merle glanced at these treasures, and then handed them to Arthur Grenville.

"This is all that the box contains, sir; now, I will read aloud this communication, for you are more deeply interested in it than am I."

"I doubt it. By heaven! what a strange thought I have; but quick! read what my brother has written there," and Captain Grenville threw himself back in an easy-chair, a strange expression upon his face, while Merle unrolled the papers in his hand, and in a low, but distinct voice began to read that which unfolded to him a strange and thrilling story.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BUCCANEER'S CONFESSION.

WHY Lance Grenville should have left him the possessor of such a valuable treasure, as were the contents of the little box, and the confession of his life, Merle could not understand; and he opened the document with trembling fingers.

It was headed simply:

"A CONFESSION."

Then it was addressed to the youth, reading as follows:

"MERLE:

"Six months ago, one placid moonlight night, I beheld a boat adrift upon the waters, and ordered my helmsman to steer toward it; which he did, and thus a strange destiny brought you across my path once more after a separation of long years.

"In that drifting boat I found five persons—four dead and one living, yet hovering on the verge of death.

"Those who were dead were common seamen, men whose lives of hardship should have kept them alive far longer than the delicate youth who had survived them.

"They were thrown into the sea as food for fishes; the youth I bore to my own cabin, and ere many days he was convalescent, for I nursed him devotedly through the hours of delirium that followed his rescue from the boat.

"I need not tell you, Merle, that you were that youth, for well you know it; but I will tell you that which you do not know, and that is—your delirious ravings told me who and what you were.

"Yet I needed not your own words for this, for already had I made a discovery. Upon your left side, just over your heart, I beheld, tattooed in red ink, an anchor.

"That symbol told me who you were, for I had tattooed it there myself long years before.

"Now that I have shown to you, Merle, that you were known to me, I will make to you a confession that is due you. Why it is due you, these lines will in the end prove to you. I will tell you of myself, of my life, and why it is I am an outlaw, a buccaneer, with no home but my ship, no nation, no people but those who follow me across the trackless seas.

"I make this confession, writing it at night, when you are asleep, or pacing the deck on your watch, and, when I am dead, it shall tell you all, for my own lips have not the courage to tell you.

"I feel, Merle, that my life is ere long to end; that my sun must go down in gloom and death at last, though I have defied danger for years; hence, while my hand is yet strong in health I pen these lines to you.

"You, and the world, know me only as 'Captain Freelance,' or 'Freelance the Buccaneer;' but my true name is Launcelot Grenville.

"I am a native of the United States, and I was born upon the Gulf coast, where my ancestors have lived for a century.

"Why Fate singled me out to curse me, I never knew; but, certain it is, that, ere I reached the years of manhood, sorrow fell heavily upon me, and its sable wings have ever flapped in my heart since, bruising it with cruel blows.

"But I will tell you all."

The confession then went on to tell of the early life of the unfortunate man; his happy home, darkened only by the cruel vendetta that hovered over it; his love for Lucille Darrington, the falling of her father by his hand, her suicide, and his wandering life and service in the young Navy of Mexico.

Then followed his return home, his love of Helen Brainard, his parting with her, that his brother might have no cloud upon his life in the woman he loved, and then his arrest for the murder of that brother, his trial and sentence to death by hanging, but his escape through the love and courage of his faithful slaves.

"Had I been guilty, Merle; had I been the Cain a court of justice proved me to be, I should never have attempted to escape, but met my death as a just retribution.

"But I was innocent of an evil thought against my brother, and I fled that I might live to show that I had been falsely accused, for I did not believe that Arthur was dead; I felt that he yet lived—in some mysterious manner spirited away, yet not to his death.

"Who had done him, and me, this wrong, I had no means of knowing; but, certain it is, I had some powerful enemy working against me, and his every action masked; that foe I hoped to have found out.

"As for Helen Brainard, for her testimony against me, I forgive her, for, in her grief she had accused me of murdering Arthur, whom she loved with her whole heart, and the law forced her to speak; but I bless my brother for not marrying her, when it was her fair lips that pronounced my doom, as her statement weighed most heavily against me.

"There was another whom the law forced to speak—Rosal Abercrombie.

"I believed him my friend; I have since thought he might have been my enemy; still I may be wrong.

"The jury who condemned me I shall never forgive—they looked me straight in the face and said I was guilty, and I have treasured them up for revenge, should I live long enough to mete it out.

"Those of them whom death may have snatched from me I cannot reach; those of them who yet live shall not escape.

"One who swore my life away I felt swore falsely; that man was Beal, the fisherman.

"He has already felt the weight of my hand, for I shot him through the heart as I fled from the gallows; he attempted to seize my bridle-rein and I killed him.

"Now that I have told you of my enemies, I will speak of my wanderings, and which prevented my returning home, when, years after, I learned that my brother was not dead, but in command of an American cruiser in Eastern waters.

"When I boarded an outward-bound vessel off the Delta of the Mississippi, I found that it was a Spaniard, with sugars for Madrid.

"Having with me the money I had the night of my arrest, I paid my passage to Madrid, determined to return to Mexico, and again offer my services, which I was confident would be accepted, after all that I had done for the infant government.

"But man's intentions go often wrong, and so I found, for our vessel was captured by a Moorish corsair, and those of us who were not slain were sold as slaves to the Moors.

"My fate led me a captive into the Moorish hills, where I became the slave of an Amazerg chief.

"To him I soon made myself most useful, in many ways, and ere long he made me an officer under him; but finding out, as soon as I had learned to speak the language well, that I was a sailor, he fitted out a vessel, armed and manned it, and made me its second in command, his brother being captain.

"The Amazerg chief I had greatly liked; his brother was a petty tyrant and a cruel monster, and I hated him; but I was forced to serve under him, for there were no means then of escape, though I determined that I would do so at the first opportunity, for the vessel, though under the Moorish flag, was nothing but a corsair.

"Several times, to my intense regret, we went into action with American cruisers, and this made me the foe of my own country, though I could not do otherwise, and begged my commander to allow me to remain in the cabin during the combat, that I might not strike against my own flag.

"But my savage commander refused me the privilege, and my sword was turned against my own people.

"One day we overhauled a Persian vessel, that had been blown by a storm far off its course, and we found it a treasure-ship, and upon it a prize, of far more value in my eyes than all the gold and precious stones it contained.

"This prize was a maiden of seventeen—a Princess of Persia, and exquisitely beautiful, beyond all compare.

"She was en route to Constantinople, to become the bride of Abdul Mezziz, the favorite son of the Sultan, and with her was her whole retinue of maidens and slaves, with the costly presents for the bridegroom—presents the value of which was beyond price.

"The Persians fought nobly and desperately to save their vessel; but Mezurah Rais, the Moorish captain, commanded a crew that knew not defeat; a monster himself, his men were little less than devils incarnate, and the Persians were captured.

"Mad with fury at the losses he had sustained, frenzied with joy at the treasures he had won, and in rapture at the beauty of the princess, whom he claimed for his prize, Mezurah Rais seized her in his bloodstained arms to carry her to his cabin.

"The poor girl gave one shriek of terror, and stretched forth her hands to me, while her eyes implored me to save her.

"My determination was instantly made, and, with my drawn scimitar, I confronted my chief upon his own deck.

"Like a very maniac he dropped his prize and rushed upon me, his yataghan uplifted to cut me down.

"He was a man as large as myself, a desperate fighter, and most powerful; but I felt that we were well matched, and I there determined to kill him.

"I will not tire you, Merle, with an account of that desperate combat, the worst of my life; but it ended in the death of Mezurah Rais, and yet that was not the end, for he had followers who rushed to avenge him, and between those who fought for him, and those who sided with me, began another deadly conflict, that resulted at last in victory for me.

"Need I tell you how thankful was the maiden to me? No, I will go on to say that had her vessel been in condition to proceed, I would have released her then and there; but it was a mere wreck, after our hot action with it, and we were compelled to move the treasure and all to our cruiser.

"Still I intended to restore the princess to her friends, and set sail for that purpose, for I was now the Moorish Rais, but on the way I learned to love the maiden more than my life, and my love was returned, and Zulah, the Persian Princess, became my wife.

"Seeking a quiet port, I chartered two vessels; one of these I devoted to the Persian crew, who in it returned home, except a few faithful followers who preferred to remain with their mistress.

"The other vessel I took for myself, placed on board all the treasure belonging to my wife, and that which had been the property of Mezurah Rais—which was enormous—as well as my own share, that was on board the corsair.

"The Moorish vessel I then turned over to the crew, and what became of it I never knew; but I set sail for Mexico after nearly a year's cruise—for I visited many lands. I arrived within sight of the sunny shores, and a storm wrecked me upon an island in the dead of night.

"Had my men remained upon the vessel, as I ordered, all would have saved their lives; but, believing that the wreck was going to pieces, they took to the boats, and when the morning sun arose we saw their dead bodies strewn the island coast, and out of all that had been with me but four besides myself remained alive—my beautiful bride, two servants that had followed the fortunes of their mistress, and one who had been a prisoner with me among the Amazergs, and whom I had taken with me upon the corsair craft.

"But though the sun shone brightly the morning after the wreck, the seas ran high, and we could not land; then, as night came on, another hurricane swept the waters, and the vessel rocked like a cradle, as it lay upon the reef, fortunately above the worst shocks of the waves.

"On that fateful night, with the winds howling like mad wolves, the waves roaring like thunder, and the vessel swaying fearfully, Zulah, my beautiful bride gave birth to a son—ay, gave her life to a tiny boy, for she died ere it was an hour old.

"That little child, Merle, born in the tempest, and upon a wreck, the child of Zulah the Persian, was yourself."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HIDDEN TREASURE.

"By Heaven! I believed it so!"

It was the excited exclamation of Captain Grenville, when Merle had read the words—"the child of Zulah the Persian was yourself."

"He was then my father," said Merle, in a voice hardly audible, and with the deepest feeling.

"Yes, he was your father, boy; but read on, for I would learn more of this strange story; and, thank Heaven, if I mourn Launcelot dead, I have his son to love," and Arthur Grenville laid his hand heavily upon the youth's shoulder, while he added:

"You are strangely like your father, Merle—the same perfect features, dark waving hair, and glorious, yet somber eyes; but you are anxious to read on—I am listening."

In a voice that now trembled, in spite of the effort to control it, the youth read on:

"Yes, Merle, you are my son; but do not curse your unhappy father for leaving you a stained name. Read on, and then judge me in your heart of hearts.

"Upon that fateful night of tempest you first came into the world, and your mother gave you her life.

"Bitterly I mourned her dead; with joy I pressed you living in my arms, for I had not lost all in her; you remained to me, and I was determined that you should not die.

"In the morning, leaving you in the care of the Persian woman, who had followed your mother's fortunes, I swam ashore, accompanied

by a slave who had been the special guard of Zulah.

"There we secured a boat, patched it up, and returned to the wreck, brought your mother's body on shore and consigned it to the earth; then we moved the treasures to the island, with the vessel's stores, and found a safe retreat to hide them in; but you needed care that could not be obtained there in that deserted and wild island, and I determined to go to the mainland.

"Leaving the slave to guard my treasure, and taking with me, in the boat, you, your Persian nurse, and the man whom I said before had been my fellow-captive among the Moors, and who was my faithful friend, I sailed for the mainland of Mexico, and in due time arrived at Vera Cruz.

"Here I found the land shaken by a terrible revolution, and making myself known I was at once given an important command as a leader, which I accepted, for I desired to drown, by stirring action, my deep sorrow at your mother's death.

"Placing you in the care of an old Mexican woman, and leaving with you your nurse, Allene, I sided with the Revolutionists.

"Before long I was transferred from a command on land to one on the sea, and given a cruiser, a swift-sailing, well-armed schooner; but shortly after the Revolutionist party were defeated on land, and the Government outlawed me as a pirate.

"Thus was it I became a buccaneer, Merle, and, from at first only cruising against my enemies, when, having to protect myself, I struck blows at the vessels of other nations, I soon drifted into illegal acts upon the high seas, that set a price upon my head, and made me at war with the world, under the name of Freelance the Buccaneer.

"Whenever I could, I went in disguise to visit you, and when you were two years old it was that I tattooed the red anchor over your heart, copying it from the ruby one I leave you in this box, and which, with the other things, was your mother's.

"It was a freak of mine to tattoo upon your white flesh the red anchor, the symbol of your mother's family; but it caused me to recognize you, when I saw it, as you lay ill in my cabin, and your words of delirium, calling upon Allene, your Persian nurse, and your telling me your name was Merle, aided in the recognition, for your mother's name was Zulah Merle, and I had named you after her.

"When you were five years old, dreading treachery toward you, after a letter from the old Mexican woman at whose house I had left you, I sent my ever-faithful friend to bring you to me, for this man had followed my fortunes, since we had left the Moorish hills together.

"From that day, when I landed him on the Mexican coast near Tampico, I have never seen him since, and I fear that he is dead, for never could he be guilty of treachery toward me.

"When he failed to be with you at the rendezvous appointed, I went myself in disguise to Vera Cruz, and there the blow that fell upon me was almost greater than I could bear, for you had been taken from the home at which I had left you, and the old Mexican woman, and Allene, I learned, were dead; they had been slain by those who stole you from their protection.

"Of him whom I had sent for you, I could learn nothing, and, to save my own life, for I was recognized, I had to fly again to my schooner.

"Since that time I have often, in disguise, visited Mexico; but never could I learn aught of you or my faithful friend, and I came to the conclusion at last, that you had both been slain by my enemies.

"Imagine then, Merle, my great joy, when, more than ten years after, I picked you up at sea in an open boat, and learned that you had been, since you could remember, a sailor-boy, drifting from vessel to vessel, until at last your ship went down in a storm, and you, and those found dead by your side, were the only survivors.

"You are reserved, Merle, for some great end, and I rejoice that I have it in my power to make you a prince among men, for, still, secreted in that wild island, is the vast treasure I placed there, and to which each year I have added largely from the richly-freighted ships that sail the seas.

"But one other besides myself knows of that hidden treasure, and he is the faithful guardian of the isle, for I believe my friend is dead, as I told you; he also knew.

"To you, Merle, my son, I leave it all, and with it I feel that you can do much good, for never one man ever possessed such riches as you will find there.

"Now, to you I give the locality of the island, and tell you how to find him who guards the treasure, and who will guide you to it; so, mark well the route and the instructions I give you:

"Sail from Vera Cruz due east ten leagues; then sail fifteen leagues due—"

But here the confession ended; something had caused Lance Grenville to leave off abruptly his writing.

Perhaps it was a call on deck, to note some strange sail; perhaps the coming into the cabin of him to whom it was addressed; but, whatever the cause, the confession was never continued, and the locality of the treasure isle was not made known.

For some minutes the two sat in silence in the cabin of the schooner, neither seeming to care to speak, after what had been read by the youth, of his father's career.

At length Merle spoke, and in a tone of deep feeling:

"The lost treasure I care little for, Captain Grenville, for, in these likenesses of my father and mother, I have that which all the riches on the island would not buy," and he gazed fondly upon the beautiful face of his mother and the handsome, somber face of his unfortunate father.

"You belong to me now, Merle, and you must return home with me, for I will hear no refusal."

"I will go with you, sir, and I will remain until I am older; then I must enter upon some useful career in life, for I feel that I have been spared death for some mysterious end; what it will be who can tell?"

"You are brave to a fault, and you are ambitious, and I predict for you a brilliant future."

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNHEEDED WARNING.

ONE afternoon, two years after the coming of Merle to live at Grenville Grange, as the plantation home was called, the youth was returning from a fishing cruise down the coast, accompanied by two negro slaves as a boat's crew.

He was running swiftly along before a strong breeze, when looking astern Merle observed that a severe squall was brewing, and knowing the impossibility of reaching the shelter of the little cove in front of the mansion, two leagues distant, he lowered away his sails, shipped his masts and cast anchor, to await the blowing over of the gale.

His craft was of the whale-boat model, but much larger and broader in the beam, and was provided with a long scope of rope and a large grapnel, which served them as an anchor when fishing in deep water.

Shortly after he had taken in his sails, a man-of-war's barge, carrying two lug-sails, came rushing along before the breeze, and threatening to run under if the squall struck it.

At the tiller sat an officer whom, at a glance, Merle recognized; it was Wilber Sebastian, who had been a lieutenant on the frigate at the time of the capture of the buccaneer schooner.

In the stern sheets sat two maidens, whom Merle did not remember to have ever seen before, and it was evident at a glance that they did not realize their danger.

The coxswain sat on the after thwart, the main sheet in his hand, and ready to ease off at a word from the officer, while the halliards and fore-sheet were tended by two seamen.

These six were all in the boat, and everything appeared in order to take in sail with the greatest dispatch.

At a glance, as the barge drove on, Merle saw all this, but his experienced sailor's eye told him that the first puff of the squall might capsize the boat, and, in that latitude, he knew how suddenly the winds swept down upon the waters, one could scarcely tell from where; hence he determined, though it seemed meddlesome upon his part, to hail the boat as it passed, and put Lieutenant Sebastian upon his guard.

As the barge came abreast of his own boat, quietly riding at anchor, and was driving swiftly by, Merle hailed, in his clear, ringing tones:

"Ho, the barge!"

"Ay, ay," answered Wilber Sebastian, somewhat gruffly.

"Pardon me, sir, but you had better take in sail," and Merle pointed to the squall astern.

"Look to yourself, sir; I sail this boat," angrily replied the young officer.

Merle's face flushed, and from his lips broke the quick retort:

"A true seaman, sir, will always take warning."

A sneering laugh was the answer from Wilber Sebastian, and the barge swept on; but Merle saw that all in it glanced quickly astern, not excepting the haughty officer in charge.

"Dave, we must prepare to anchor by the stern, and run in the wake of that idiot, for his boat will surely be capsized when that black squall strikes him."

"Ay, ay, Massa Merle, just as you says, sir, an' I knows you is right," replied the old negro, who was none other than the one that had so bravely aided Lance Grenville in his flight nearly twenty years before.

"If we are driven past the barge, we cannot pull to windward, if needed, and if we anchor by the bow, in swinging round we may go over, so we'll anchor by the stern and to windward."

A moment more and the necessary preparations were made; and not an instant too soon, for the squall broke on the sea, and, though

everything was let fly, the barge went over, and all on board were thrown into the water, where they clung for their lives to whatever would support them.

A moment more and Merle was at hand to rescue them, and while Dave and his companion anchored the boat and attended to the line, the youth divested himself of his coat and boots and sprang into the sea.

A bold stroke brought him to one of the maidens, and with a word of encouragement he seized her in his arms, and the next instant she had been drawn on board his own craft.

Seeing that Wilber Sebastian was swimming toward the boat, with the other maiden, Merle aided one of the seamen who could not swim, and calling to the others to follow, the whole party were soon rescued from their most perilous situation, by one whose warning had been unheeded, and but for whom all would have been drowned.

A short and severe blow, and the squall passed away as suddenly as it had come, and Wilber Sebastian said in no pleasant tone, for he felt angry and humiliated at what had occurred:

"Now, sir, I will right my barge and relieve you of our company."

"You had better let your barge drift in, sir, while you all return with me," said Merle, quietly.

"I wish no advice, sir; if I should ask it, it will not be from a boy."

"Wilber Sebastian, how dare you speak thus to one who has just saved our lives? For shame, sir!"

It was the maiden whom Merle had rescued that spoke, and her eyes flashed with anger.

She was scarcely more than sixteen, as graceful as a sylph, and as beautiful as a fairy—a child-woman, as it were, whom to look upon was to love.

The other maiden was her senior by two years, and also beautiful, but of a different style, and the resemblance to Wilber Sebastian proved that she was his sister.

"Oh, Mildred! don't speak so, for my brother should certainly know what to do, better than this young man," said the sister, coldly.

"He has not proven it, certainly, Estelle."

"Miss Monteith is inclined to be severe," almost sneered Wilber Sebastian.

"I am sorry you think so, Wilber; but life is too precious a gift to play with, and the result having proven as this young gentleman predicted, I could not but give him credit for knowing what he was about."

"If Lieutenant Sebastian desires to continue on in his own barge, I have nothing to say against it; but," with a glance around at the clouds, "the blow does not seem yet over, and those who will remain in my boat are certainly welcome to do so."

"If you do not forbid, I will right my boat, sir," sneered Wilber Sebastian.

"On the contrary, sir, I will aid you," and Merle sprang into the sea, and, followed by the coxswain and two seamen, soon had the barge on a level keel again, the young officer looking on the while with the most insulting nonchalance.

A few moments more passed, and the barge was bailed out, and all in readiness once more.

"Haul alongside, coxswain!" ordered the lieutenant, and the two boats lay broadside together.

"Now, ladies, I will aid you into the barge, and we will no longer trouble this experienced young sailor," and Sebastian held out his hand to Mildred Monteith.

"Thank you, Wilber, but I will accept the kind offer of this gentleman, and remain where I am," was the quiet reply.

"Why, you certainly do not mean it?" said the officer.

"I certainly do."

"Why, may I ask, do you desert my protection for that of another?" and it was evident that Wilber Sebastian was getting very angry.

"Upon the principle that a burnt child dreads the fire," was the calm rejoinder.

The face of the lieutenant grew black; but he ground back in his teeth some angry words, and said, hoarsely, turning to his sister:

"Estelle, set Miss Monteith a lesson in obedience."

Estelle Sebastian glanced around at the lowering clouds, and then at the land, nearly two leagues distant; she loved her brother devotedly; but she loved her life more, and felt safer where she then was.

"Brother, why not let us remain here? Your boat is all wet."

It did not strike the maiden that she had been overboard, and was as wet as the boat; but any excuse is better than none.

"As you girls will insist upon trusting yourselves to a mere boy, and a storm coming on, I feel it my duty to prevent you," and so saying he grasped Mildred Monteith, who was nearest to him, around her waist to place her in the barge.

"Hold, sir! Miss Monteith, is it your wish to remain under my protection?"

There was a certain ring in the voice of Merle, calm as he spoke, that caused Wilber Sebastian to hesitate.

"It is, sir: if I go with Lieutenant Sebastian it will be by force," replied the maiden.

"And you, Miss Sebastian, what is your choice?" and Merle turned to Estelle.

"I will remain here," and the maiden cast another glance skyward.

Merle turned smilingly to the discomfited officer.

"You hear, sir: you will have to leave the ladies under my protection."

"Never, boy!"

Again did Sebastian throw his arm around the waist of Mildred Monteith, as though to drag her into the barge.

Without a word Merle disengaged his grasp, seized him in his powerful arms, and, to the surprise of all, not excepting the furious officer, who saw this wonderful exhibition of strength, tossed him bodily into the barge, while, with a stern order to Dave and the coxswain to let her go, for they were holding the two boats together, he shoved the two apart with one stroke of his foot.

"Now, Dave, up with that anchor, and we'll run for the shore," said Merle, quietly, unmindful of the fierce oath that arose to the lips of Wilber Sebastian.

Like the very wind the swift boat flew landward, and just at dark landed at the Grenville pier, where they were met by Captain Grenville, who had seen their approach from the piazza of the mansion.

"My poor, foolhardy brother! I fear harm will befall him, sir," and Estelle pointed to the coming storm.

Merle's answer was a shrug of the shoulders; not a very polite response but a very suggestive one.

"See, sir, the storm is sweeping down upon him; will you, who are so brave and skillful, not go to his aid?"

It was Mildred Monteith that spoke, and she laid her tiny hand upon his arm, as she turned her beautiful eyes upon him.

"The barge does seem in danger. Come, Dave, we will see if we can save them," said Merle, quietly, and springing into his boat again he continued:

"The captain will see you to the mansion, ladies."

Casting off from the pier, he hauled dead upon the wind, and stood out into the darkness and storm, watched by the group upon the land until the gloom hid his little craft from view.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SKELETON BURIED.

It was with a little fear and trembling that Estelle Sebastian crossed the threshold of the elegant home of Grenville Grange, as between her blood and the Grenvilles there had been only enmity, for the maiden's mother had been a Darrington, a sister of Colonel Ferd Darrington, who had fallen by the hand of Lance Grenville.

True, on shipboard, her brother and Arthur Grenville had ever been on intimate terms, if not friends, and all had hoped that the vendetta between the two names had been buried in the grave with Ferdinand Darrington, and that the grinning skeleton of the past would never be exhumed again.

Still she could not refrain from a slight shiver, as she stepped into the hallway.

"Welcome to Grenville Grange, young ladies," said Captain Grenville, politely, as he ushered the two maidens into the broad hallway.

"Be seated, please, and I will order you a glass of wine to warm you up, and will then drive you home in my carriage, for I believe, Miss Sebastian, that you are now living at Darrington Lodge?"

"Yes, sir; my brother and myself inherited it from uncle Ferd, but we only lately decided to make it our home; it is a grand old place."

"It is, indeed, and I am glad to see you have added a number of improvements; the place has too long been deserted. Permit me?" and Arthur Grenville filled several glasses of wine and offered them to his fair guests.

"The carriage is at the door, sah," and the old negro butler appeared with a stately bow.

"With your permission, Captain Grenville, we will remain until the boats return, and I know that my brother is safe," said Estelle Sebastian, anxiously.

"Assuredly, Miss Sebastian; I only ordered the carriage, thinking you might catch cold, if you did not drive home and change your clothing, for, being bachelors, neither Merle or myself have any ladies' wardrobe to place at your disposal."

"Thank you, sir; but we will risk the cold—Oh, hark! how savagely the wind blows! It must be fearful upon the water," and Mildred Monteith walked to the window and leaned her beautiful but now pale face against the pane.

"If you will allow me to offer a suggestion, young ladies, I will say that I can send the carriage over to Darrington Lodge after your maid, Miss Sebastian, with orders to return at once with all necessary clothing you may desire, and you can remain my guests for the night, as the storm seems likely to continue for some time."

The offer of Captain Grenville was at once

acted upon, and the carriage rolled away upon its errand, while the maidens and their host gathered in front of the windows that looked seaward, and tried to pierce the darkness and the storm, all of them far more uneasy than they would admit.

"Captain Grenville, who is the gentleman who saved our lives this afternoon?"

It was Mildred Monteith that asked the question; Mildred Monteith, the heiress to vast wealth, the belle and the beauty, and the most intimate friend of Estelle Sebastian, whom she had accompanied to Darrington Lodge for a visit of several months.

"That young gentleman, Miss Monteith, is Merle Grenville, my *protege*, and adopted son. He is as true as steel, utterly fearless, a perfect seaman, and all else that is noble," said Arthur Grenville, with considerable enthusiasm in his tone and manner.

"Was he not picked up at sea some time ago, sir?" asked Estelle Sebastian.

"He was picked up at sea by Captain Freelance, and—"

"Freelance the Buccaneer, that terrible ocean scourge?"

"Yes, Miss Sebastian; he was found adrift in a boat, by Freelance the Buccaneer, and, almost dead with exposure and starvation, he was nursed back to life, and made by the chief one of his officers."

"A pirate officer?" and Estelle's brows arched prettily.

"Yes, Miss Sebastian, per force of circumstances, a pirate officer; but one who saved my life, and nearly lost his own for the act; ay, and one who, alone, captured the crew of the buccaneer schooner and surrendered them to me."

"Did he surrender the man who had nursed him back to life?"

It was Mildred who made the inquiry, and she seemed interested in the answer.

"No, he would be incapable of such an act; for his protection of me, the crew turned against him, and would have hung him, but for the interference of Captain Freelance, who lost his life in defending his *protege*, and Merle was seized and hung to the yard-arm; but a stroke of lightning miraculously saved him from death, and the horrified buccaneers rushed in terror into the cabin, and thus fell a prey to the presence of mind and prompt action of the boy they would have murdered; since then Merle has lived here with me, and here I hope he will ever make his home."

"Was nothing known of his antecedents, before being picked up at sea?"

"He was stolen from his home in early life, and has been a sailor almost since his infancy; he comes of a good family, but his parents being dead, he prefers me to other kindred he has living."

"Thank you, Captain Grenville; what a life of thrilling romance your adopted son has had," said Mildred, and as she spoke heavy steps were heard upon the gravel approach to the house.

The maidens turned deadly pale, and sunk down into convenient chairs—what news would they hear?"

Scarcely less pale, but perfectly calm, Captain Grenville went to the door and met there several forms.

"Miss Sebastian, your brother is safe!" called out the captain.

"And Mr. Grenville?"

The question came from the lips of both maidens.

"Also safe," and Captain Grenville entered the room, followed by Wilber Sebastian and Merle.

"Thank God!" and Estelle threw herself into her brother's arms.

It was a joyous meeting, for all had dreaded the worst, and then Merle was warmly greeted by both maidens, and thanked most sincerely for their lives.

"Twice I owe him my life, and here, before all, I wish to humbly ask him to forgive and forget my conduct this afternoon," and Wilber Sebastian held forth his hand, which Merle warmly grasped, saying, quietly:

"It is forgiven and forgotten, Lieutenant Sebastian; I am only sorry I did not arrive in time to save all."

"All!" and a cloud swept over their joy.

"Yes. I went over ere Mr. Grenville reached me, the barge is as cranky as a canoe, and the coxswain and one of the seamen were washed away and drowned," said Wilber Sebastian, in rather an indifferent tone, when his own foolhardiness had been the cause of the loss of two fellow-beings.

"I cruised about for them, sir, for half an hour, but could find nothing of them, and the sea getting too rough for my boat I put in," explained Merle.

"It is too bad, indeed; poor fellows, they have but met a sailor's fate; but here comes the carriage, and you can now have dry clothing, while I can supply Lieutenant Sebastian from my wardrobe. As soon as you have made your toilets, come down and we will have a hot supper for you, for remember, you are my guest, as long as you will honor me with your company."

From that night, the grass no longer grew upon the path between Grenville Grange and Darrington Lodge; it had been better for all had those, in whose veins flowed the Grenville and Darrington blood, never joined hand in friendship, across the graves of their kindred—better if the grim skeleton of the past had remained in the closet of each mansion, and not been dragged away to a temporary burial.

CHAPTER XVI.

FOR THE LOVE OF HATE.

THE relation that Mildred Monteith held to Estelle Sebastian was that of friend. They had been schoolmates at a fashionable boarding-school for five years, and, as school-girls often will, Estelle had made up her mind that Mildred and her brother Wilber should marry.

At heart Estelle had good traits, yet she was somewhat haughty in manner, and certainly a little selfish, and could see no fault in the handsome Wilber.

The two were orphans, and her brother had been her guardian, since the death of their father, when Wilber was eighteen.

It was supposed that the two were left rich by their father; but there had been lavish extravagance somewhere, and when the debts were paid, a house in New Orleans, and a few thousand dollars in bank, were the sum total of their inheritance, excepting the plantation home of Darrington Lodge, left them by their uncle.

The Darrington slaves had gone to pay the debts of the dead colonel, and the Lodge had gradually gone to ruin, until Wilber proposed that their town-house should be sold, and the plantation fitted up for their home, and Estelle gladly consented, and with their furniture and effects, and the dozen slaves they owned, the brother and sister removed to the Darrington Lodge.

Accompanying them was Mildred Monteith, the little beauty and heiress, who had been left an orphan when a mere child, and turned over to the guardianship of an old friend of her father, who allowed her to do pretty much as she pleased, for he was a bachelor and cared little for the society of the fair sex.

Hence, when he attended punctiliously to sending her the monthly income allowed her, and looking after her very large estate, he considered that he did his duty toward his ward, and readily gave his consent for her to go with Estelle for a few months.

"The country is a good place for girls. All girls should live in the country; 'twould keep them out of mischief; towns were made for men," he said, and so he believed.

Now, though Estelle really loved Mildred greatly, there was a little plot in her heart against her, and this was to throw her into the society of Wilber, whom, except on several occasions before, the maiden had never met.

It would be such a nice thing if Estelle could make a match between them.

Mildred would get such a handsome, splendid husband, and Wilber would get such a lovely wife and—large fortune.

Blind to the plot, Mildred went to Darrington Lodge, and all seemed in a fair way to turn out as Estelle had planned, for Wilber, aiding and abetting his sister in her plans, had not given vent to his violent temper the week that they had been in the country, or shown the heiress one of his weak points.

But the afternoon of the storm Wilber had forgotten himself; he was impatient of restraint, detested advice, and proud of his sea knowledge, he cared not to be told what to do, and hence he broke forth in angry reply to Merle when hailed by him.

Merle he had not liked when he had met him, two years before, on the frigate. Why he did not know, yet certain it was he disliked him.

After the scene on the boat, and the return of Merle to his aid, although he knew that the youth had a second time saved his life, he was not thankful to him, but on the contrary hated him, for the obligation he placed him under; but he felt that it was his duty to make amends for his past conduct, and had frankly acknowledged his error in public, and begged pardon for the offense.

This act placed him once more in the good graces of Mildred Monteith, who really very much liked the handsome young seaman.

After the night spent at Grenville Grange, a friendly intimacy sprung up between the inmates of the two plantations, and many were the drives and sails that the young people enjoyed together, until rumor said that there would be a double wedding at Darrington Lodge; but then Madame Rumor was not altogether right, for Merle was not, as was supposed, the devoted admirer of Estelle Sebastian, but of Mildred Monteith.

True, Estelle greatly admired the handsome waif, and had he not seemed to care for Mildred, might have loved him; but, as matters stood, it disarranged her plot, for her friend was destined as her brother's bride, and such she should be; upon this two persons were determined, and those two were the brother and sister.

At length the visit of Mildred Monteith drew to an end, and she carried home with her the

heart of Merle; but it was a fair exchange, for she left hers with him, and both were happy.

If Wilber Sebastian felt grieved at this turn of the tide, that had first set in his favor, he had the good sense not to show it, and Estelle's kiss of congratulation was as warm as though Mildred had been engaged to her brother, instead of to Merle.

A month after the departure of Mildred, Wilber Sebastian was ordered away; but a few days following Estelle wrote a note to Merle, begging his attendance at the Lodge, for with an old lady, a distant relative of some kind, she still made the place her home.

Merle obeyed at once the call, and soon dismounted at the door of Darrington Lodge.

"Mr. Grenville, a messenger came to-day bringing me letters from my brother, and they may be of interest to you," said Estelle, after greeting her visitor kindly.

"Anything that concerns yourself and Lieutenant Sebastian, Miss Estelle, interests me," politely returned the youth.

"Well, my brother says," and she began to read from an open letter she held in her hand:

"I have often heard Merle Grenville speak of the humdrum life he leads at the Grange, and wish that he had gone into the navy, as his ambition first prompted, and I now have an opportunity of giving him a chance, to take the first step up the ladder of fame.

"Through Commodore Brainard, and our uncle, Senator Sebastian, I have been ordered to a large and swift-sailing schooner, lying in Pensacola harbor, and which I am to arm, fit out and man with a good crew for *secret and dangerous service*—so read my orders.

"Otis Alden, formerly on the Constitution, has reported to me as my First Luff, and I have made Dr. Lucien Bethune, your old admirer, Estelle, my surgeon, and have the privilege of appointing my Second Luff, upon condition that I select a man who is a thorough seaman.

"Now I know of no one who is better suited for the position than is Merle Grenville, or any one to whom I would rather give it, and hence, through you, I make him the offer.

"I have already seen Mildred and talked with her upon the subject, and she says it will be a good thing for him to accept my offer—you know she is ambitious that her future husband shall be other than a planter.

"Now if Grenville accepts, ask him to write me at once, and I will send him orders when and where to report for duty, and we will have a jolly cruise of it.

"I am not certain, but I have an idea, that we are destined for southern waters—say the Caribbean Sea, after pirates; but this idea is of course *entre nous*."

Having finished her letter, Estelle looked up with a smile.

"It is certainly very kind of Lieutenant Sebastian to remember me, and I appreciate his offer so much that I will take him at his word—that is if Captain Grenville does not object, for you know I am not nineteen yet, Miss Estelle, and consequently under age."

"So young? I really would have thought you twenty-two."

"And I feel older than even that age; has your messenger returned yet?"

"No; he goes back to-night."

"Then I shall have my letter ready for him, and let me thank you for your kindness," and Merle mounted his horse and rode away.

Two hours passed and he was again at the Lodge, his letter of acceptance in his hand, for Captain Grenville had consented, when he saw how Merle's heart was set on it.

"A cruise of two years will do you good, Merle, I expect; then, if there is no war, resign your commission, marry Mildred, and come and settle down here, as I don't think I have a very long lease on life, and Grenville Grange must not be without a master—you know my will leaves you all my property!" Captain Grenville had said.

"Why will you talk that way, father! you are yet a young man, a fraction over forty, and there is a long life before you, and I wish you would marry—I think you would be happier."

"Marry! I marry?"

"Yes, father; why not?"

"Whom should I marry, Merle?"

"Estelle Sebastian."

"Hal! hal! Merle, you are mad; I am double her age," said Captain Grenville, in mock levity.

"You do not look it, sir; she is young, beautiful, and certainly admires you greatly."

"She admires me, Merle?"

"She does indeed, sir," and Merle might have added, but he did not: "You admire her."

It was true; Captain Grenville had been very much drawn toward the brilliant, beautiful girl; but he doubtless never would have thought of such a thing as marrying her, had not Merle put the idea into his head.

Now, as Merle rode away, to deliver his letter of acceptance of the offer made him by Wilber Sebastian, Arthur Grenville muttered:

"Marry Estelle Sebastian—why not, if she will accept me?"

"The old love for Helen has utterly gone, and there is a germ of affection in my heart for this

beautiful girl, though in her veins flows Darrington blood.

"I will think of it; nay, I will marry her, if I can, for already I am half in love with her."

"Poor Helen, I fear she is not happy in her married life; once I thought so, she seemed so gay; but, now, when she laughs, there seems a hollowness in it to me, and there is a sadness way down in the eyes that smiles will not hide.

"How different all might have been—how true, how true:

"Of all the sad words of tongue and pen,
The saddest are these—*It might have been.*"

"Had it been, poor Lance would not now be at the bottom of the sea, the brand of buccaneer upon his brow, and I—I would have been her husband—the father of her child.

"Poor Helen, I fear that wild, reckless son of hers will yet cause her trouble; she should have sent him to sea where he would have had wholesome training; now he rules the household, even to the old commodore, who was always so stern upon his ship's deck; then he ruled all under him; now he is little better than a childish old man, governed by a rattled-brained boy of seventeen.

"If Helen and I—bah! what a fool I am to be dreaming of that olden time—I will let the dead past bury its dead, and across the graves of her kindred and mine stretch forth my hand to Estelle Sebastian."

In the meantime, while Captain Grenville was pacing the piazza musing, Merle had reached the Lodge and given his letter to Estelle.

"And what did your father say?"

"Oh, he was willing, when he saw I had set my heart upon it; but I dislike to leave him—he will be so lonely."

"We will have him come over here often, to drive and take tea with us."

"It will be so good of you, and father is very fond of you, Miss Estelle."

"Fond of me?" and the maiden's face crimsoned.

But it was with a sudden thought that flashed into her busy brain.

"Fond of me, is he?" she thought to herself:

"I must see to this, for he is not a man to be cast aside; he is desperately handsome, as stylish as man can well be, and there is a certain fascination about him I have always felt in his presence.

"He has won a good name, comes of good stock, none better, and is certainly not old—he hardly looks thirty-five notwithstanding the silver threads on either temple.

"But the graves between us? Nonsense! who cares for dead bones? certainly not I.

We'll drop our tears together, equally over the dead Grenvilles and Darringtons, and if the specters don't like it, why let them come to the wedding, for, from the skeleton fingers of the Grenvilles I will get my wedding dresses.

"Hal! hal! every closet in the mansion can contain a grinning specimen of anatomy, if their mold does not rub off on the silk dresses, or tarnish the gold with which I will keep them hidden.

"Yes, Arthur Grenville is a very rich man, and his son and mine would keep the inheritance from falling upon the shoulders of Merle, the waif."

Such were the thoughts that passed through the brain of Estelle Sebastian; but the sweet smile on her face never changed, and she laughed out:

"Why, I never thought the captain hardly remembered my existence, when I was out of his sight."

"Indeed he does; he often speaks of you, and I do hope you will be kind to him," and Merle rode home thinking he had sown seed that would bring forth good fruit—and he had, for he had set two people to thinking of each other, and that is dangerous employment, where a man and woman are concerned.

From that day Merle began his preparations for his sea cruise, and two months after received orders to report for duty at New Orleans.

In obedience he set sail for the city, by way of Lake Borgue, in the little yacht Captain Grenville had given him, and he carried as passengers the captain himself, Estelle Sebastian and her ancient relative.

On arriving at the hotel where Captain Wilber Sebastian was stopping in New Orleans, Arthur Grenville for the first time in his life, wrote his name with an addition; he wrote:

"Arthur Grenville and wife."

The marriage had been a quiet one, the ceremony being performed at Darrington Lodge the morning of their departure from home; the red feud between the two names had ended at last.

The party found the schooner ready to sail, and, after hasty congratulations to his sister and her husband, Captain Sebastian invited all to a breakfast on board his beautiful vessel.

It was a happy *dejeuner* in the little cabin, and toasts for happiness and success in the future, were drank all round; then farewells were said and Arthur Grenville and his wife, accompanied by their ancient relative were rowed ashore, while the schooner spread her white wings and flew down the river like an eagle after its prey.

"How sorry I am that Mildred was out of town; it was such a disappointment to Merle not to see her, and she will be really distressed to know that she missed him," said Mrs. Grenville, as the party stood on the pier watching the rapidly-receding vessel.

"Yes, but the schooner sailed a week sooner than was anticipated, Estelle, and Mildred's last letter to Merle told him that she was compelled to go to Mobile with her guardian, in regard to some legal matters about her property, but that she would return to-day; we will drive by and see if she has gotten home yet."

As Arthur Grenville spoke a stylish carriage, with servants in livery, dashed rapidly down to the river-side.

From the windows peered the beautiful face of Mildred Monteith—pale and anxious.

Her eyes falling upon the distant schooner, she fell back upon the soft cushions, covering her face with her hands, and from her white lips broke the words, as though coming from her heart:

"Too late! oh, too late! he has gone to his ruin! for Wilber Sebastian has taken him with him *only for the love of hate.*"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PURSUIT.

"MILDRED, dear Mildred, what a disappointment."

The maiden started, as the voice met her ears, and her face flushed angrily, and hot words sprung to her lips, as she beheld the lovely face of Estelle peering into the carriage window.

But, with a mighty effort, she checked her anger, and another thought flashed through her brain, and, with a forced smile through her tears, she said:

"He is gone, then, and I did not see him?"

"Yes; brother did not expect to go so soon, and we were surprised, upon our arrival last night, to have him tell us he must sail this morning; we hoped you would arrive up to the last moment, and Merle left you this letter," and Estelle handed a sealed missive to the maiden, who took it and said earnestly:

"I am glad I was not forgotten; but I see Captain Grenville and Mrs. Dabney there."

"Yes, and ah! Mildred, would you believe it? I am Mrs. Arthur Grenville."

"You!" and the eyes were wide open now with wonder, and the face very white.

"Yes; Arthur and myself were married the morning we sailed from home; is it not all strange?"

"It is all strange."

"You do not congratulate me, Mildred—are you dazed with grief at Merle's departure?"

"Yes, I do congratulate you, Estelle, and I am half dazed with grief that Merle should have gone."

Her manner was strange, and yet Estelle did not notice the emphasis upon the pronoun *you*.

"Here comes my husband," and Captain Grenville and Mrs. Dabney approached the carriage.

After a hasty greeting, Mildred said in earnest tones:

"Captain Grenville, it was most important that I should have seen Merle before the sailing of the schooner, and I am going to ask you to do me a very great favor."

"In any way that I can serve you, Miss Mildred, command me."

"Can you charter a yacht here, do you think, or any vessel that is very fast?"

"For what purpose, Miss Mildred?" asked the captain, in surprise.

"I will tell you; I wish to overhaul yonder schooner, and for a vessel I will pay any price in reason."

"Why, Mildred, are you so silly as to throw away a large sum just for a farewell kiss?" said Estelle, reproachfully.

"I am not silly, and money is made to cater to our desires; you have promised, Captain Grenville, and I shall expect you to keep your word, for it is most important that I should see Merle—most important indeed, and what is done must be done at once."

Arthur Grenville gazed into the beautiful, earnest face before him, and saw that she was in deadly earnest—that she had some good reason for her act, other than a romantic desire to run after Merle and bid him good-by.

After a moment's thought he said:

"Let me make a suggestion, Miss Mildred?"

"I am listening, sir."

"Out at Lake Borgue Merle's yacht is awaiting us; it is a snug little schooner of thirty tons, and will easily accommodate our party, so I propose that you ladies drive home and make your preparations for a cruise, while I purchase stores and send them out to the lake, and by night we can set sail, and endeavor to head off Captain Sebastian at the South Pass of the Mississippi, for he will not run very rapidly down the river; if we miss him there, we can run across to Havana, where he will touch, he told me, for a day."

"Captain Grenville, God bless you."

It was all that Mildred could say, as her heart was full with joy.

"You may go on your cruise, if you like, but I will return to my home in Virginia, for now

that you are married, Estelle, I will be no longer needed at the Lodge: but it beats my time, when girls run after young men, as they do nowadays," and Mrs. Dabney bridled up considerably.

"You will doubtless be benefited by the change, Mrs. Dabney—this far Southern climate does not seem to agree with you at all; you look fully ten years older than you did when you came, and the yellow fever is—"

"Captain Grenville, when does the first packet sail for the north, sir?" interrupted Mrs. Dabney, as soon as Mildred spoke of her age, and referred to the yellow fever.

"To-day, madam."

"I will take it, you can send me my baggage when you return to your home."

Arthur Grenville bowed politely, and said:

"Now, Miss Mildred, if you will drive Estelle and Mrs. Dabney to the hotel, and after you have made your preparations, will join them there, I will get the yacht's stores, and we will be in readiness to start as soon as possible."

Mildred quickly threw open the carriage door, and the captain aided the ladies into the vehicle, which was at once rolled away toward the Hotel Saint Louis.

Two hours after, Arthur Grenville arrived, and found the three awaiting him—Mrs. Dabney anxious to go at once on board the packet for Baltimore, and Mildred and Estelle equally as anxious to be off on the yacht.

Entering the carriage in waiting, and which was Mildred's own vehicle, they drove away, dropping Mrs. Dabney en route at the packet, and wishing her *bon voyage*, a wish she took gruffly, for she had hoped to rule at Darrington Lodge, and had expected Estelle to go to her husband's home.

"Now, Hannibal, drive with all speed out to Lake Borgue—don't spare the horses; do you hear?"

"Yes, Missy Mildred, I make dem go like scared rabbits, 'kase dey hain't had much to do o' late," replied Hannibal, evidently forgetting, that every night since Mildred's departure for Mobile, ten days before, he had been giving his black Dinah a drive out into the country behind the stylish grays.

But they sped swiftly along the level road to the lake, and in good time arrived in sight of the graceful little yacht.

Boats were already busy carrying stores from two wagons out to the vessel, and half an hour after the anchor was up, the sails spread, and the yacht moved swiftly over the waters, gilded by the light of the setting sun.

A thorough seaman, Captain Grenville at once laid his course, so as to gain every league he could, and, with a young man, whom he had engaged in New Orleans to act as his first mate, and Dave acting in the capacity of second mate, the yacht was well officered, while, for a crew, it had half a dozen slaves from Grenville Grange, all of them raised on the water and good sailors.

Still, swift as glided the yacht over the waves, it seemed to go too slow by far to suit Mildred Monteith, who paced the deck with nervous tread, as though some great trouble rested upon her heart.

Though not appearing to, Captain Grenville watched her closely, for he felt that she held some good reason for her present strange course, that in good time she would make known, and her apparent nervousness caused him to dread coming evil.

Estelle also watched Mildred closely; from the first she had been opposed to this foolish trip, yet she dare not say so, for she saw that Mildred was determined, and also could see that she was, though polite and attentive to her, yet acting so from policy.

She did not like the turn affairs had taken, and wished the suspense over.

"What can cause her to act so, I wonder? Has that foolish brother of mine been showing his dislike to Merle openly, and caused her to suspect harm may befall her lover, if he sails with him? It may be, for Wilber is fearfully indiscreet at times, and I do hope will not act rashly."

"If the youth does not return, if aught should befall him, and I judge it will, from what Wilber said, I hope my brother will have the good sense to keep his skirts clear of suspicion."

"If he does not; if Mildred should ever suspect that he had wronged Merle, then he need never expect to win her."

"No, no, I know her too well; quiet as she is, amiable to a fault, she is a Creole, and revengeful; and determined, too, as a blind man could see, by her persisting in this foolish whim."

"I am certain, if Arthur had not offered the yacht, that she would have chartered a vessel at any price."

"How swiftly we run! I fear we will head the schooner off; but I hope not, sincerely."

"If we do, I trust we will find all well, for I know she suspects Wilber."

Then raising her voice from her musings, Estelle said:

"Mildred, see how swiftly we fly along!"

"Fly? why we are crawling, it seems to me; Merle has always told me that this craft was very fast—I confess that he must be fearfully

prejudiced in favor of it because it belongs to him," and Mildred spoke really pettishly, and caused Captain Grenville, who held the helm, to look at her with surprise.

"That girl has some deep motive in all this—what it is, I cannot fathom; but I will aid her all in my power," he muttered, and then gave the order to trim the sails closer. "We must get all we can out of her on this tack, Mr. Ainslie," he said, calmly, addressing Merton Ainslie, the young mate he had engaged in New Orleans.

"Ay, ay, sir; she certainly has her bowsprit pointed now right into the wind's eye," replied the young sailor, casting an admiring glance at Mildred, as she passed him in her steady pacing to and fro.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A PLOT FOR RUIN.

UNTIL a late hour Mildred paced the deck, and then retiring to the snug little state-room assigned to her use, she awakened her maid, who had accompanied her, and was asleep upon the cabin floor, and bade her bring her a light.

The light was brought, and seating herself by the little dressing-stand, Mildred took from her bosom two letters.

They were both addressed to her—that is to.

"MIS MILDRED MUNTEETH,
"Number 100 Government Street,
"Mobile, Alabama."

The handwriting was not of the best, and the spelling would have kept the writer at the foot of his class in school.

Opening one of the letters, and the seal of which had been broken before, Mildred read:

"MIS MILDRED MUNTEETH.

"DEER MIS.

"I kalled

at yer home ter see you partickuler, an as yer nigger Butler says as how you is at Mobile an wont lee back fur 10 Days, I makes bold ter right ter you, Mis, bein as how ther nigger gin me yer dereeshun arter I hed gin him a cussin & five Dollars.

"I guesses as how the last did ther biz.

"Now, Mis, I right ter you ter say as I is a frend of you & ther yung man as is ter be Mister Munteeth: no, Mis, I dont mene that, but ther yung man as is ter make you Mis Greenville.

"He saved my life twice, when I was Bound for davy Jones locker & I dont forget a frend & bein as how he is not hear, an is goin to sail in ther skunner with Captin Wilber Seebastin, I rights to you to come right home and run acrost his bows, cause hees hed in fur breakers.

"Ef I cud see yer, Mis, I cud tell you more, an ef you dont git here in time I will right you agin tellin you all about it, & I will try & se Mister Greenville & tell him he is gittin among sharks.

"I sails in the skunner to, & will look arter him all I kin.

"No moar at present, Mis, from

"Yours trooly

"JACK BUNTLINE.

"At yer service, Mis."

This peculiarly written letter was what caused Mildred Monteith, immediately upon its reception, to start back to New Orleans, under the care of a friend who was returning, while her guardian remained to complete the business that had carried them to Mobile.

It was a letter that told of danger to Merle, and that was sufficient.

At an early hour of the morning, when the aristocratic Creoles were turning over for their sweetest nap, she returned to her home, where she lived alone with the servants.

Her negro butler, the one to whom Jack Buntline had given "a cussin' and five dollars," met her at the door.

"Welcome back, Missy Mildred," he said, with a grin of delight.

"Daniel, a man came here to see me some days ago, and you gave him my address in Mobile?" cried Mildred, as soon as she had entered the mansion.

"Fore de Lor' God I didn't, missy," exclaimed the pious Daniel, with a ready lie, thinking, like his old-time namesake, he had gotten himself, figuratively speaking, into the "lion's den."

"And you saw no man, who came here asking to see me on particular business?"

"No, missy; dat sailor-man done tole you a lie," and the whites of Daniel's eyes went up piously, while he muttered, *sotto voce*:

"I goin' ter fro de letter I has inter de fire."

"I am sorry, Daniel," said Mildred, not noticing, in her anxiety, that Daniel had betrayed himself by speaking of "a sailor man." "I am very sorry, Daniel, for I had hoped he had called again, or left a letter with you for me; it must have been Hannibal he saw."

"Oh, Missy Mildred," and Daniel's eyes brightened, "I understand you now; you axes me ef dere was a man called to see you, an' I says no; but dere was a gemman as come, a sailor gemman, an' he axes me for your address in Mobile; he didn't see Han'bal 'tall, missy, an' I gives him your direction, 'cause he was so perlite, an' he gi'n me a—" dime, Daniel was going to say; but he remembered in time that a gentleman would not be so mean, and he twisted the word on his tongue into "dollar."

"Well, has he been back again?"

"Yes, missy, not half a hour ago, an' he gi'n me this letter for you," and Daniel dove into the recesses of an inner pocket for the epistle.

Hardly did it appear in the light of day, before Mildred snatched it from his hand, glanced over its contents rapidly, ordered the carriage and drove to the river, to arrive, as the reader has seen, too late to catch the schooner.

This is the second letter received from Jack Buntline, and which Mildred read over again, by the light in her little state-room on the yacht:

"SKUNNER-UV-WAR SEE SARPINT, {
"Wednesday mornin'." }

"MIS MILDRED MUNTEETH:

"I regrets as how

you has not bin able to git hear before the sailin uv ther skunner, which is to sale at onst, so as to git Mister Greenville ter see before you cum back.

"I tole you as how I wud make nown to you that there was trubbel ahead fur yer lover, kase I heard with my own ears that he was not to be aloud to return to the buzom of your family, the same as how he was not wanted to be youre lover, bein as how he hed cut ther cable ov Captin Seebastins affeshuns fur you.

"We sales from hear to Havany, an a letter mout reach him thar callin him away from the skunner, fur ef he stays on board sumthin mout happen to him, an I guesses as how it will, kase he has got enomys aboard, and its mighty easy to loos a man in a storm, or ef we git inter a skrimmage with bloody pirats to shoot him in ther back, or stick him with a Lyetalian stilleter, the same as Mexikin seeyor-reeters uses when they is jellous.

"I rights this in a hurry, as the skunner sales in 2 hours, an I will leave it fur you with yer nigger Butler, an ef he aint perlite ter me arter ther five Dollars I gin him I will punch his hed.

"No moar now, Mis, an I will keep my i on ther yung Luff.

"Excoos writin an spellin as my quill pen is yery bad, an I guesses as how ther ole goose was on-helthy, kase it wont right ter soot.

"Yours trooly,

"JACK BUNTLINE.

"At yer service, Mis.

"P. S.—Ther Luff is now on board but I cant git a chance ter speak to him.

"P. S. 2.—Doant ever tell as how you herd from me, or i will be a gone koon sartin." J. B."

"A noble heart under a rough exterior the poor fellow has, and I will reward him for what he has done, when we overhaul the schooner—and overhaul it we must," said Mildred, firmly.

"Oh! that we could but make this vessel fly, for I shall not rest until I have seen Merle," and the unhappy girl threw herself down in the little berth; but with the first glimmer of dawn she was upon deck again, and every time that Dave's voice rang out, at sight of a sail, she turned alternately red and pale with hope and dread.

"Sail ho! massa."

"Where-away, Dave?" asked Captain Grenville, cheerily, for the yacht was now in the path of the schooner.

"She comin' wid the wind, sah—jist yander," replied the faithful negro.

"Ay, ay, and 'tis a schooner," cried Captain Grenville, turning his glass upon the stranger.

Nearer and nearer came the strange vessel, until it was soon discovered not to be the object of their search.

"He must have passed out of the river by this time; we will doubtless have to follow him to Havana, Miss Mildred."

"Follow him anywhere, everywhere! so that we overtake him," vehemently replied Mildred.

"There's a sail coming in, sir; perhaps if we hail, we may find out if the schooner has been seen by them," said Merton Ainslie.

"A good idea, Ainslie. Dave, head so as to pass near yonder vessel," called out Captain Grenville to the helmsman.

In an hour's time the stranger, a brig flying Spanish colors, passed near.

"Olo la brigantina," hailed Captain Grenville, in Spanish.

"Ay, ay, senor!" came the answer.

"Have you seen an armed schooner, American, heading for Havana?"

"Passed her at dawn this morning, senor; she carried a white flag at the fore, with a queen sea-serpent upon it."

"Thank you, senor; it is the schooner we seek," and turning to Mildred, who had breathlessly listened to the reply, he continued:

"Well, Miss Mildred, it's a stern chase to Havana. Mr. Ainslie, let all sail be crowded upon the yacht."

Under her increased canvas the fleet vessel sped on, and all believed she would drop anchor in the harbor of Havana very soon after the schooner.

But with night the wind set in to blow a gale, right in their teeth, and the following day was rough and squally, while a severe storm came on with the night which forced Captain Grenville to run before it far off his course.

Verily the elements seemed enrolled against the stanch little vessel.

At length land was sighted—the green shores of the "Ever Faithful Isle," and at the same time a sail was discovered slowly standing along the coast.

"It is the schooner, thank Neptune!" exclaimed Captain Grenville.

"Where can she be coming from, sir?" asked Ainslie.

"Doubtless blown off her course as were we; she certainly takes it leisurely, for see they have

nothing but the mainsail and jib set, in this spanking breeze," said Arthur Grenville.

"Dere's mighty few fokes on de deck, sah," called out one of the negro crew from the fore-top.

"By Jovel you are right, Joe; what can it mean?"

"The flag is half-mast, sir, and union down," cried Merton Ainslie.

"Oh, Heaven! are we too late?"

It was Mildred that spoke, and she turned her eyes upon the distant schooner.

The yacht was now flying so as to head the schooner off, and with all sail set that would draw.

As they drew nearer, Captain Grenville signaled the vessel-of-war who they were, and the schooner immediately lay to and awaited the yacht's approach.

Sweeping close under the stern of the Sea Serpent, the yacht was brought to, and Captain Grenville hailed:

"Aho, the schooner! Sebastian, in God's name what has happened to you?"

All breathlessly awaited the answer, while they gazed at the almost vacant decks of the schooner, for not a dozen men were visible on board.

"There has been a mutiny and a number killed."

"Merle Grenville was the mutineer leader."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CAT-OF-NINE-TAILS.

WHEN the schooner-of-war Sea Serpent passed out of the murky waters of the Mississippi river into the blue depths of the Gulf of Mexico, a sudden change was visible in the face of Wilber Sebastian.

Before, it had been pale and anxious; now it was flushed, and a look of triumph shone in the eyes while a smile of cruel deviltry rested upon the lip.

It was his first separate command, and as captain, he felt himself undisputed ruler of his ship and crew—upon his deck he was whatever he chose to be, and he was determined that those under him should know it.

The senior lieutenant, Otis Alden, and an old-time friend of Wilber Sebastian, seemed to partake of the same feeling as his commander, for, whenever he could, upon the frigate, be a petty tyrant, he had never allowed the opportunity to escape.

Lucien Bethune, the surgeon, seemed also of the same mind as his captain and the senior Luff, for he had always been on the side of cruelty when naval discipline had been discussed.

Hence it was, that Merle found himself the only one of the superior officers who believed in tempering discipline with mercy; but his views were laughed at by his comrades, and he felt that the schooner's crew were destined to have no easy time of it.

In this conjecture he was wholly right, for, once in blue water, Captain Sebastian had all hands called aft.

His short address to the crew was a foreboding of what they might expect:

"Men, this is a vessel-of-war, and I am her commander. My discipline shall be such as to allow no disobedience or laziness among my crew. If you would keep scars from your backs, fly at my command; go forward to your duties."

The crew went forward to their duties, but many a brow lowered and many a face paled.

"Jist what I said he was—a cruel tyrant. Shipmates, yonder is ther devil, an' we is in his power," growled Jack Buntline.

"Now up into the rigging there, you devils!" yelled Captain Sebastian, suddenly, and the men flew to their posts.

Then for an hour the crew were kept upon the run, shaking out reefs, reefing again and resetting, and every time descending on deck to be cursed as a pack of lazy lubbers.

Of course this incessant work broke the crew down, and those who were utterly winded fell under the eye of the captain for punishment.

"Rig the gratings, Mr. Grenville, for punishment."

With a white face and stern lips Merle obeyed, and the crew were mustered to see their unfortunate shipmates punished for no offense whatever.

Forward of the gratings stood the marine guard with loaded muskets and bayonets fixed, facing the crew, and further aft the officers with drawn swords, while the surgeon was standing on one side, with the boatswain and his mates near by.

Fronting the gratings stood the master-at-arms and the prisoners—five in number.

With cruel calmness Wilber Sebastian inspected the arrangements, and said, sternly:

"Strip the first prisoner, boatswain, and seize him up."

Quietly the boatswain obeyed, and a young man, a mere youth, was dragged to the grating, and his arms and legs made fast, as he stood in a nearly upright position.

His shirt was then dragged from his shoulders, exposing his naked back, and Captain Sebastian read the "articles of war," charging the prisoner with neglect of duty.

"Now, boatswain, let your cat wag its tails!" he ordered, with a smile.

"How many, sir?" asked the boatswain.

"Give him a dozen!"

"Ay, ay, sir," and the boatswain seized the cat-of-nine-tails.*

Measuring his distance well, the boatswain rolled up his shirt-sleeve, to give the muscles of his arm fair play, and separating the "tails," so that each one might spread and do effective work, he brought the lash down upon the naked back with terrible force.

Blood-red lines crossed the back as the whip was raised again, and the voice of the master-at-arms was heard counting:

"One!"

Again fell the cruel lash, causing the poor man to writhe in agony, but no groan escaped his set lips.

"Two!"

A third time fell the "cat," and the blood spattered those who stood near.

"Three!" called out the master-at-arms, and yet no cry for mercy.

"Four!"

Had Wilber Sebastian no mercy?

None!

"Five!" and as the lashes were withdrawn they dragged the minced flesh with them.

"Six!"

And thus it went on until the master-at-arms reported that the dozen blows had fallen upon the naked back.

Still he uttered no groan.

"By Heaven! I'll drag a cry for mercy yet from his stubborn lips," cried Wilber Sebastian, in a fury.

"Release him now, and seize up the others! then his turn shall come again."

"The poor wretch was taken from the grating, his back dripping, his face as white as marble, and his lips gashed, where his teeth had pierced them in agony."

Another prisoner was then lashed up, and, remembering that his shipmate's pluck, in not crying out, had condemned him to another dozen, he yelled lustily, and was let down at the end of the twelve.

Then followed the third, each with their allotted twelve, and the fourth wretch shrieked for mercy ere he was seized up to the grating.

"Oh, God! what have I done?" he asked, and as the cruel lash cut deep into his flesh he cried:

"Captain, oh! captain, for the love of God! mercy!"

"Give the bleating calf another dozen for his howling," yelled Captain Sebastian, and the order was obeyed, the wretched man fainting several times, and each time revived by Lucien Bethune, to undergo his torture.

"Now, boatswain, seize up that dumb brute again, and strike hard! he shall cry me mercy," said Captain Sebastian, grimly.

Again was the first prisoner lashed to the grating and upon his gashed back fell another dozen cruel blows; still no cry for mercy.

"He has had two dozen, sir," and the master-at-arms politely saluted.

"Boatswain's mate, take the cat and give him another dozen."

"Captain Sebastian, this is inhuman."

Wilber Sebastian turned quickly, a wicked look in his eyes, and met the indignant gaze of Merle fixed upon him.

"What mean you, sir?"

The silence of death rested upon all; even the sufferers ceased their groans.

Calm, distinct, fearlessly came the answer:

"Just what I say, sir; this is inhuman—those men have been guilty of no offense."

"I will attend to you, anon, sir; boatswain, give him another dozen, I say."

There was an evil glare in the eyes of Wilber Sebastian; there was a reckless, defiant look in the eyes of Merle.

Again the whip fell heavily; but the form did not even flinch—not a muscle twitched, and motioning to the boatswain to hold, Lucien Bethune stepped forward, and laid his hand upon the man's pulse.

Then he felt his heart, and shook his head.

"Proceed, boatswain!" ordered the inhuman captain.

"He is dead, sir."

It was Lucien Bethune that spoke.

Wilber Sebastian turned livid; but he said, quickly:

"Not so, Bethune; a little blood-letting will not kill him; but cut him down."

The bleeding form was lowered from the grating, and all saw that the surgeon had told the truth.

The noble fellow was dead; he had died without a cry for mercy, or a groan of agony; his brave heart had broken beneath the cruel lash, and Wilber Sebastian was his murderer.

"Captain Sebastian, you are an inhuman wretch—a coward, and a murderer!"

"Hail by the heavens above! you shall suffer for this," and Wilber Sebastian turned upon the one who had made the bold charge against him.

But Merle stood calm and firm.

* Nine tails, or ropes, eighteen inches long, each, and as thick as the little finger, and made fast to a handle twelve inches in length; a cruel whip indeed.

He had been goaded to madness by all he had witnessed, and, had his life been the forfeit, he would have spoken as he did.

"Hand me your sword, sir!" and Captain Sebastian held forth his hand.

"You are not fit to receive it," and Merle drew the blade, snapped it quickly in two, and threw the pieces into the sea.

"By the Virgin! but this is mutiny!"

"Call it what you please, sir; I refuse longer to serve under such a tyrant."

The words were calm and fearless.

"Ye gods! you shall suffer for this; master-at-arms, seize that man."

It seemed at first as though Merle intended to resist; but he thought better of it, and quietly submitted to the arrest.

Had he known what was to follow he would have died rather than have submitted.

A hellish look now crossed the face of Wilber Sebastian and he turned to his officers.

"You see, gentlemen, that this man is a mutineer?"

They both bowed in assent.

"I could have him shot dead for this; but I will be merciful and spare his life."

"Boatswain, seize him up for punishment—he shall feel the cat!"

A groan broke from the crew, and grim smiles rested on the faces of Otis Alden and Lucien Bethune; as for Wilber Sebastian, his handsome face was now fiendish in its look of hellish joy.

Merle distinctly heard the base order, and his face turned to the hue of a corpse.

"Do you mean it, Wilber Sebastian?"

The tone was deep and suppressed, and there was a strange glare in his eyes.

"I do, by the Eternal! Seize him up for punishment, I say, boatswain!"

The crew moved nervously, as the boatswain stepped forward to obey, and Wilber Sebastian turned toward the officer of marines, and motioned him to be ready for an outbreak.

All expected Merle would resist; but instead, he said, with a forced calmness that was terrible:

"I am ready, boatswain."

CHAPTER XX.

THE MUTINEER.

WITH his own hands Merle threw aside his uniform coat, and then his pallid face flushed as he bared his back to the lash.

"Will that powerful, splendidly-formed man submit to the degradation of the lash?"

Such was the thought of all, and scores of hands clenched upon their clasp-knives.

Every face was white now; every man's breath was hard drawn.

It was bad enough to see an ordinary seaman lashed, for an offense committed; but, to behold an officer, one who had rebuked inhumanity, one who, if he had erred in addressing his commander as he did, had erred upon the side of right.

This sight was horrible indeed. Would not the other officers step forward to his relief?

Would they see him humiliated, when by remonstrating they could prevent it?

Yes, they were but the tools of their captain; he had selected them knowing he could use them.

The marine lieutenant had attempted to speak in remonstrance, but a stern rebuke had silenced him.

It thus lay with the men—the crew.

They stood in a silence that was foreboding.

The four men who had been punished had ceased to feel their pain; they crouched down on the deck, awaiting what would follow.

The man who had been killed lay stark and stiff before them.

Were his white face and wild, staring eyes not a warning?

It seemed not, for the work of preparation went on, and Merle was tied to the grating.

A sigh ran through the crowd of seamen; one word from the doomed officer, and Wilber Sebastian and his tools and supporters would be hurled into the sea.

But he spoke not that word, and the lash whirled around the boatswain's head.

Had he no pity?

No; he gloried in the power to let fall his whip upon the back of a superior; Wilber Sebastian knew his man when he made him his boatswain.

A swish through the air, and down came the savage blow upon the scarless white shoulders.

A groan of agony burst from the crew, sounding like the muttering of a coming storm; yet no word came from the lips of Merle.

"Silence!"

It was Wilber Sebastian who shrieked forth the word.

Again fell the whip, and red ridges crossed the back looking like network.

A third time the lash fell.

A fourth, a fifth, a sixth; still no groan from the sufferer—not even the quiver of a muscle.

And thus it went on, until the twelve were struck, and the back was seamed with gory ridges.

"Feel his pulse, Bethune, and see what he can bear."

The sneering order came from Wilber Sebastian.

Stepping forward, Lucien Bethune laid his hand lightly upon the pulse.

It was strong and strangely even, in spite of what he had undergone, for each blow had been *nine stripes; eighty-four in all.*

"He can stand four dozen, sir."

Such was the report of the inhuman surgeon, whose duty it was to heal, not to afflict the body of his fellow-kind.

The face of Merle was quickly turned toward him, and Lucien Bethune never forgot the look he saw there.

"Oh, a man with his *physique* should stand *six dozen.*"

There seemed a strange maliciousness in the voice and words, and Merle turned his eyes upon the speaker; it was Otis Alden, and he remembered the gaze that met his.

"Boatswain mate, give him another dozen!"

Merle nerved himself to bear the torture, and the executioner took his stand.

"Never! by the God above, never! Down with thy tyrants, lads!"

The voice was hoarse and commanding, and Jack Buntline sprang forward, and drove his knife to the hilt in the boatswain mate's bosom.

All were taken by surprise at the sudden and bold act; but the crew were now at white heat, and, with their drawn clasp-knives, rushed upon Wilber Sebastian and his supporters.

There were loud orders to the marines to fire, and a volley of musketry, that cut down a dozen men, fired at close quarters as it was, and then the officers, and those who upheld them, were driven back upon the quarter-deck.

"Release me! For the love of God sever my bonds!" shrieked Merle; but none heard him; those who had sprung to his defense were seeking revenge upon his persecutors.

"Oh, God! this must not be," and with superhuman strength Merle tore himself from the grating, severing the cords that bound him as though they had been so much yarn.

With a capstan bar in hand, he rushed into the *melee*, his face livid, his back bleeding, his eyes glaring, and every muscle standing out like knots; he seemed a very demon in the fray.

"Back! all of you! I say back! Obey, or I will crash in your brains with this bar!"

It was to the crew he spoke—not to the small party who had rallied around Wilber Sebastian, and who were about to be hurled into the sea when Merle appeared upon the scene.

"It is for you, sir, we struck," cried Jack Buntline, in intense surprise.

"I know it, my brave fellow, and I thank you; but this conflict must end here—I command it!"

Then turning to Wilber Sebastian, he continued:

"Captain Sebastian, your hatred for me has caused all this trouble. Lay down your arms, would you and your followers save your lives."

"And give you the chance to lay the lash on our backs?" sneered Wilber Sebastian.

"Not so; had I desired I could have raised the men to mutiny ere you scourged my back. Between you and me there is a deadly account to settle, but that time is not now."

"Will you surrender, sir?"

"What will be done with us?"

"I will hold you and your followers prisoners, and command the schooner myself, until we meet some vessel that I can take passage upon, accompanied by my brave and unfortunate shipmates here."

"Then you, and those who choose to remain with you can continue on your cruise in the schooner."

"What guarantee have I that you will do so?"

"My word."

"Bah! you will break it as soon as we are in your power."

"Wilber Sebastian, you are a fool; we can hurl you into the sea in five minutes."

"There has been blood enough spilled; a score of dead men are now on this deck, as you see; but if you do not accept my terms, which are all in your favor, I will turn the gallant lads loose upon you, and then no mercy shall be shown."

"Why do you wish to save my life?"

Merle's eyes flashed, and his voice trembled, as he said:

"To revenge myself, in my own way, upon you."

Wilber Sebastian shivered in spite of himself, and turning to Otis Alden and the others, talked with them for a few moments in a low tone.

"The time is up! Shipmates get ready!"

It was the voice of Merle, and it rung out like a trumpet.

"We accept," sullenly said Captain Sebastian, and he extended his sword.

Merle quietly took it and threw it into the sea, and in five minutes more Wilbur Sebastian and his followers, nine in number, were in irons.

Merle at once took command of the schooner, appointed acting officers from among the crew, and headed for the western end of the island of Cuba, expecting to meet some Mexican trading vessel coming out of the Caribbean Sea.

But a storm came on, and for several days the schooner was buffeted about by the elements, and no vessel had been sighted, such as Merle desired to embark on.

At length a schooner was descried close in toward the Cuban coast, and, Merle's previous experience in those waters told him that the little craft was one of the Spanish smugglers that ply a good, yet illegal trade along the shores.

"There is one chance, lads! If the fellow refuses to carry us to Mexico we will force him to do it," said Merle.

Half an hour after the little schooner, which had put to flight at sight of the Sea Serpent, was brought to, by a shot.

The Spanish flag floated at the peak, and the captain, a swarthy Spaniard, who called himself an honest trader, was furious at being brought to, and refused all requests to take the mutineers on board.

"Then, señor, we shall use force; you have a dozen men and I fifty, all well armed."

The Spaniard saw that resistance was useless, and yielded, while he swore that Spain would make the United States tremble for the insult upon him.

"Now, Captain Sebastian, I leave you, but in irons; two of your men I shall carry with me, for a couple of leagues, and then let them return in this boat, by rowing back, and they can unlock your irons."

"This will give us several hours' start, and we will not fear your pursuing us then."

Wilber Sebastian fumed like a tiger at this.

He had believed that Merle would release them, and then he intended to stand off and on with the schooner, and sink the little vessel with his guns.

But he was foiled, and saw the mutineers sail away, while he writhed in irons, unable to prevent.

When at length the two men returned in the schooner's yawl, and took off the irons of the prisoners, the little vessel was hull down in the distance, and night was coming on.

With his decimated crew, and half of them marines, not seamen, pursuit was useless, and the idea was given up.

Cramped by their having been ironed, all were willing to lie by for the night, and rest themselves; but with the early morn sail was gotten upon the schooner, and the course laid for Havana.

An hour after the yacht was sighted, and with malicious triumph Wilber Sebastian had answered the hail of Arthur Grenville, for he had seen Mildred Monteith upon the deck.

His words created the wildest excitement on the yacht and Captain Grenville hissed forth:

"Wilber Sebastian, if you have lied to me I will tear your false tongue from your throat," and he called away a boat, at the same time telling Estelle to look after Mildred, who had fallen like one dead upon the deck.

CHAPTER XXI.

OUTLAWED.

SWIFTLY the boat from the yacht cut through the waters, and Captain Grenville with angry brow and flashing eyes, sprung upon the deck of the schooner.

At the gangway he was met by Wilber Sebastian, who said in a tone of reproach:

"I forgive your savage words, Grenville, for I know you must feel fearfully cut and hurt as I do; but it was all so sudden and unexpected."

"This is no explanation, sir."

"I will soon give it; but how is it I find you cruising upon the coast of Cuba, when I left you at New Orleans?"

"Captain Sebastian, are you attempting to trifle with me?"

"By no means, Grenville; but your presence here surprises me, and—"

"Sebastian, you have made the vilest charge, in the naval catalogue of crimes, against Merle Grenville, and I demand that you substantiate it; if you do not, and fully, by the God in Heaven! you should rue it, were you my own brother."

Wilber Sebastian, a coward at heart, was astounded; he felt that he had gone too far.

He had hated Merle from the first, and had only wished him under his command to destroy him, apparently in a legitimate way, but effectually, and the opportunity had come sooner than he had expected.

Both Otis Alden and Lucien Bethune were largely his debtors for gambling debts, and, unprincipled as he was, well he knew that he could use them, hence he had made known to them that Merle was his rival and must, in some manner be gotten out of the way, and under the promise of a release of their gold obligations to him, they had entered into his plans.

Mildred, Wilber Sebastian was determined to win, and he felt that he could do so, if Merle was out of the way.

A petty tyrant, he had enjoyed showing the crew his power, but he had not thought Merle would so soon place himself in his clutches.

Now that the affair was over, he could tell his own story, and be backed up in it by those with him.

Had he been able to kill Merle, so much the better for him, for there could be no proof against him, and his hirelings would swear as he wished them, and the deserters and mutineers would not dare appear upon American soil to prosecute him.

But now, he had to face Arthur Grenville, himself a sailor and a gallant one, and who he knew would hold him to the strictest accountability for his conduct toward Merle.

"Captain Grenville," he began, slowly, "I desire to make a statement to you, sir, and if you doubt it, you are at liberty to act as you please in the matter."

"First, sir, where is Mr. Grenville?"

"He left this schooner yesterday heading the crew whom he led in mutiny."

"How did he leave, sir?"

"I will tell you all, and Lieutenant Alden, and my surgeon, Dr. Bethune, besides the others that are with me, will vouch for the truth of what I say."

"A gentleman's word should need no vouchers, sir."

Wilber Sebastian winced at the cutting remark, and replied:

"Upon leaving New Orleans, Captain Grenville, I discovered that I had a bad lot to deal with in the shape of a crew, and, when we struck blue water, their conduct was such that I was compelled to have five of the worst triced up and given the *cat*; but this did no good, and in dealing severely with one stubborn fellow I was most shamefully abused by Grenville, who, before all, called me a wretch, and—"

"Did Merle do this wrong?" asked Captain Grenville, who could not tolerate interference with duty upon board ship, yet who little knew what cause Merle had to interfere.

"Pon honor he did, and worse; in fact he was so abusive to me that I demanded his sword, and before my eyes he broke it in twain and threw the pieces into the sea."

"The boy must have gone mad."

"So I thought, and so I verily believe, for he seemed to lose control of himself all of a sudden."

"When he did this, I ordered him under arrest, and, the crew at his back, he led the mutineers; the boatswain's mate was killed, and then a score of men lost their lives, until we were seized and ironed—we whom you see here."

"This is astounding, that you tell me, Sebastian."

"It certainly was to me, Grenville."

"Go on, I am listening."

"Well, during the days of storm we were kept in irons, and yesterday afternoon the mutineers fired upon a Spanish trading schooner, and captured it, after which he took his mutinous bounds with him and stood away into the Gulf, but I think his destination is to some Mexican port."

"Why did you not sink him with your guns when he left the schooner?"

"Such was my intention; but he outwitted me, by leaving us in irons and carrying two of my men with him, until he was hull down; they then rowed back and released us, and here we are, *en route* to Havana."

"Sebastian, what I hear crushes my trust in mankind. Great God! for Merle to do such a deed!"

"But if he has thus been guilty he should not escape. Havana is but ten leagues away and the Governor-General will send vessels in pursuit; no, I believe that there is an American cruiser in the harbor, and you can man your schooner with part of its crew, and both go in chase."

This was not what Wilber Sebastian desired. If an American vessel captured the mutineers it would necessitate a court-martial in the United States, and the ugly truth, for him, would come out.

If a Spanish vessel captured Merle and his followers they would be given but the show of a trial, condemned and executed within twenty-four hours.

Then a sudden thought came to him.

"But this was in Spanish waters, and the vessel seized was a Spaniard, so the Governor-General will have to act in the matter."

"It matters not, so that some one acts promptly. This spirit of mutiny must be crushed at once, or our navy will go to the dogs. Now I will return at once to the yacht, and we will head for Havana."

"Ah, me! It is a sad duty to tell poor Mildred and Estelle this galling story," and Arthur Grenville returned to his boat, and five minutes after the yacht and schooner-of-war were swiftly gliding along in the direction of Havana.

Upon arriving on board the yacht, Captain Grenville found that Mildred had recovered from her swoon, and she was seated in impatient expectancy awaiting his coming, while, almost equally as pale, Estelle sat by her side.

"Well, is he dead?"

The words were jerked out by the beautiful girl.

"No! Would to God he was."

"Captain Grenville, what do you mean?" and Mildred sprang to her feet and confronted him.

"Be seated, my poor child, and have your fond heart torn as mine has been."

"Merle is alive; it were better for him, and all of us, were he dead."

"Why will you keep me in suspense?"

"I will no longer: Merle led a mutiny on board the schooner, and—"

"It is false! false as the brazen throat that told the lie," and Mildred seemed almost leonine in her fury.

Captain Grenville calmly shook his head.

"So I believed—so I said; yet it is too damnably true to doubt, Mildred."

"What! do you doubt Merle, Captain Grenville?"

"The proofs are against him; I will tell you all."

In a few words Arthur Grenville made known all that he had heard from Wilber Sebastian, and Mildred listened without an interruption.

"Now what have you to say, Mildred?" asked Estelle, a shadow of triumph in her tones.

The maiden flashed her eyes upon her and answered:

"I have to say that if Merle is a mutineer, he was driven to it, to ruin him."

"Ah! there is some terrible mystery behind all this, and time will one day prove that he was more sinned against than sinning."

"You are going now, you say, sir, to Havana, to send vessels in pursuit of the mutineer?"

"Yes, such is the intention of Captain Sebastian, and bitterly as I deplore it, I cannot but urge him to do so."

"I think you are right; he must be captured, for then we can hear his side of the story."

"Mildred! do you not believe my brother's statement?"

"No, Estelle."

"I am sorry, but I forgive you, as I know he will, for you have a deep sorrow to weigh you down. I hope, too, that the mutineers will be taken, for then you will see that Wilber has spoken the truth."

"The harbor is in sight, sir," called out Merton Ainslie from the deck, and the three left the cabin.

The Sea Serpent was in the lead a half-mile perhaps, and heading in under the frowning Moro Castle, her flag at half-mast and union down, which was excuse for not saluting with her guns.

A half-hour more and the two vessels were at anchor, and Captain Grenville and Wilber Sebastian rowing shoreward, to have an interview with the Governor-General, for a glance around the harbor had shown that there was no American cruiser there.

Two hours they remained away, and then they returned, Wilber Sebastian shunning the yacht, and going on board his own vessel.

"Well?"

As she asked the question in one word, Mildred looked up into the eyes of Arthur Grenville.

He silently pointed to several barges, filled with Spanish seamen and putting out from the shore.

"Those seamen are loaned Sebastian to man his schooner and go in pursuit; the Governor-General also sends a Spanish sloop-of-war and a cutter in chase—there they come down the harbor, now."

As he spoke, Captain Grenville pointed to two cruisers swiftly flying through the vessel-dotted waters.

As they passed the yacht the Sea-Serpent's anchor was up, her foreign crew at their posts, and she swung round and followed in the wake of the Spaniards.

Half an hour after, as the sunset gun from El Moro echoed over the city, Mildred saw the American schooner take the lead of the Spanish cruisers, and the three stretch away out into the Gulf under clouds of canvas.

"And you, sir, what will you do?"

"Remain here, Mildred, until they bring us news. Come, we will go ashore to pleasant quarters."

Mildred cast one glance seaward, and silently got into the waiting boat, whither Estelle had already preceded her.

But though Havana lay before her, that old and strange city of romance and reality, she felt no pleasure in the sight, for her heart was bowed down with a crushing woe; Merle had been outlawed by the Governor-General as a deserter, a mutineer and a pirate.

CHAPTER XXII.

CONDEMNED TO DIE.

THE proud old Governor-General of Spain's "ever faithful isle"—that is ever proving unfaithful—sat in his gorgeous rooms at the *Palacio*—enjoying a cigar and glass of wine as a "night-cap," before retiring to rest, for midnight had passed.

"The Senor Capitan De Silva begs an audience, *Excellenza*, late as it is," said a young page, entering.

"What? De Silva back again? Assuredly, boy; bid him enter."

The page departed and the Governor-General continued aloud:

"He has been gone ten days, and— Ah! senor, I am rejoiced to welcome you home again."

A tall, elderly man entered the room, his eyes sparkling, as he advanced and took the proffered hand.

He was dressed in the full uniform of a Spanish naval captain, and commanded the sloop-of-war, sent ten days before, in pursuit of the mutineers, deserters and pirates, as Merle and his followers were now called.

"I am rejoiced to get back, *Excellenza*, and more so, to report that I was successful."

"Sainted mother be praised! And the cutter and American schooner?"

"I have not seen them, senor, since the night I left Havana; we parted company after gaining a good offing."

"And you have the pirates?"

"Safe, senor, and came to report to you, and ask what is to be done with them."

"I'll decide after I have heard your story—there, help yourself to wine, and light a cigar; I can always talk best with a cigar between my teeth."

The Spanish captain accepted the double invitation; dashed off the wine and lighted a fragrant Havana.

Then he said:

"I obeyed your orders, *Excellenza*, and steered for Sisal, and then followed the Mexican coast, while the American headed for Metamoras, to run down to Tampico, and the cutter laid his course for Vera Cruz to run up to Tampico, which was to be our rendezvous, you know, senor?"

"The second night out, if your *Excellenza* remembers, we had some very rough weather, for a hurricane had swept to the north-east of us, and must have been felt all along the southern waters of the Gulf."

"Through this storm I was enabled to meet with success, for otherwise, I am confident, our cruise would have been useless, judging from the young fellow who was the leading mutineer, and a handsome, fearless fellow he is, only too sad-looking, I think."

"The storm, I say, *Excellenza*, aided me, for the fourth day out we sighted a small wreck, both masts gone, which proved to be the very craft I was searching for."

"I saw by its crowded decks that something was wrong, and on sending an officer on board, found the mutineers, who surrendered quietly, knowing how useless would be resistance."

"I had them ironed and brought on the sloop, and held some conversation with the leader in my cabin; but you can imagine my surprise when my daughter, the Senorita Rena, who you know accompanied me, as she often does, came from her state-room and saluted the handsome mutineer as her brave defender."

"Ha! she fell into bad hands, some years ago, when Freelance, the Buccaneer, captured the brig that brought her from Spain, and I'll warrant this was the youth who did her that gallant service," said the Governor-General.

"I am sorry to say he is, *Excellenza*, for he saved my daughter's life and honor, and you remember entreated Freelance to release her, which he did, telling her he did so to please his *protege*, and himself paid the amount of her ransom to his crew."

"I remember, De Silva. What a strange fellow that Freelance was, and, by the way, the American that was here the other day, the Senor Grenville, is the very man we have to thank for ridding the seas of the pirate. He is now a planter in the States, he told me, having resigned his commission in the Navy. It is not often you sea-rovers get tired of blue water."

"Not often, *Excellenza*; but to return to my story."

"When I found who the youth was, I was deeply pained to have to be the one to make him prisoner, after the noble service he had rendered Rena, and I told him so; but he promptly said I must do my duty, and that was the end of it. I put him in irons; but how an ex-buccaneer officer can be a lieutenant in the United States Navy, I cannot understand, and he declined to have anything to say about himself. He smilingly told me that all would come out, when he and his men were taken to the United States for trial."

"He doubtless is still following his buccaneering inclination, and, by some means got a commission in the American Navy, for the very purpose of taking the schooner."

"It would look so, *Excellenza*; still, he gave the vessel up when it was in his power, and went on board the trading craft, which, by the way, senor, is nothing more than one of those smugglers we are trying to run down, so you see I did double duty?"

"Yes; but, De Silva, we will have to protect the smuggler in this case, as he was under the Spanish flag; he can go for a coast-trader, you know?"

"Certainly, senor, none need know that it was a smuggler the mutineers took, for that would alter the case against them."

"The case against them is clear, De Silva; they were mutineers, committed murder upon the high seas, in Spanish waters, overhauled and seized a Spanish vessel, and were captured by a Spanish cruiser after I had outlawed them as pirates, and I shall execute them as such."

"Then you will not turn them over to the

Americans, *Excellenza*?" asked Captain De Silva, in surprise.

"Not I! The honor belongs to Spain, and I shall not be robbed of it. They go to-night from your vessel to the Moro, and day after to-morrow morning, I will have them marched out and shot as pirates; then it will all be published—A lieutenant of the noted Freelance, the Buccaneer, with his men, seized an American vessel-of-war, was run down, and taken by the gallant De Silva—"

"After the hurricane had dismasted their craft, *Excellenza*."

"You are too modest, senor:—'was run down and captured by the modest and gallant Captain De Silva, of the Spanish navy, who carried them in irons to Havana, where the merciful Governor-General put them out of their misery, by having them shot immediately, giving them just time enough to pray to the devil, their father; how sounds that, De Silva?"

"But will the Americans not demand them, *Excellenza*?"

"They shall have their bones; there is no American cruiser here, and if one is signaled as coming in, I'll have them led out and shot at once."

"But the Senor Grenville, now here?"

"Is an ex-officer, and here unofficially. No, De Silva, you and I, and Spain shall not be cheated out of the honor of shooting those fellows. How many did you say there were of them?"

"Forty-seven men, with their leader, *Excellenza*."

"Buono! I wish there were more; their execution will put down piracy and smuggling in these waters. Help yourself to more wine, senor."

"Thank you, *Excellenza*; and I shall send the prisoners to the Moro?"

"At once; what, going?"

"Yes, *Excellenza*."

"My compliments to the Senorita Rena; tell her I regret it, to shoot her handsome preserver, but he has only himself to blame for it."

Captain De Silva bowed and left the Governor's palace.

At the gateway a *volante* awaited him, and he was driven rapidly down to the pier, in front of which lay his vessel, and springing into his waiting boat he was soon in his own cabin.

Seated at the table, apparently awaiting his return, was a maiden of twenty.

She was attired in a misty white dress, and from the silver comb upholding masses of blue-black hair, drooped a black veil.

Her form was exquisitely molded, above the average height, and every movement was willowy and unstudied, while her dark face, passionate eyes, and ruby lips, made her face wondrously beautiful.

This was the Senorita Rena De Silva, a Spanish maiden of noble lineage, and who, in the two years or more, she had been in Cuba, had broken hundreds of hearts, for she was a sad coquette, the world said a heartless one; but she was forgiven, as she possessed vast riches, independent of her father's wealth, which was considerable.

"Father, I am glad you have come; and what says the Governor-General?" she asked, anxiously.

"There is no hope, Rena," and the Spanish captain threw himself down in an easy-chair.

"No hope! He will not promise to intercede with the Americans for his life?"

"I did not ask him, Rena, for I saw that it would be useless; he will allow the Americans no say in the matter—he will have the whole crew, leader and all, shot within thirty-six hours."

"What! Dare he do this?"

"Yes, Rena, the Governor-General is utterly fearless, as you know, and intends to take the glory, if glory there is, in executing these men as pirates, and what can the Americans say when it is done?"

"Thank him for taking the unpleasant duty off their hands, I suppose; but if he intends shooting them all, one will not be missed—the lookers-on must be content with forty-six shot down, and he must be allowed to go free."

"I dare not ask it of the Governor, Rena."

"You dare not, father; but I dare do it!"

"You, my daughter?"

"Yes, I Rena, your daughter; I will go to the palace to-morrow, nay, to-day, for it is nearly dawn now, and I will ask, nay, demand his life."

"It will be useless, Rena."

"I can but try, father."

"True, and I hope you will succeed; I hate to see the brave fellow die, pirate though he be. Now retire to rest, while I see that the prisoners go ashore," and Captain De Silva left the cabin.

But Rena did not retire to rest until she saw boats leave the side of the vessel-of-war and disappear in the shadows of the gloomy Moro; then, with a deep sigh, she turned from the stern port, from which she had been gazing, and sought her own state-room, with one determination in her heart.

That was that Merle the Mutineer should not die, if gold, or a woman's plotting could save him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A USELESS APPEAL.

At a very early hour, on the morning following the arrival of the cruiser of Captain De Silva, in the harbor of Havana, a *volante* drew up at the gateway of the *Palacio* of the Captain, or Governor-General of Cuba.

From the vehicle a lady, heavily veiled, alighted, and gave her card to the sentinel, who dispatched it by a sergeant in to the ruler of the "Gem of the Antilles."

In a few moments a young officer, in gorgeous uniform came forward, and bowing low, bade the lady follow him to the *Palacio*.

Ascending the spacious stair-way to an upper corridor, upon the opposite side of which was a grand hall-way, the visitor was ushered out upon a cool veranda which opened upon a lovely garden filled with orange and lemon trees, while the air was laden with the fragrance of innumerable and rare flowers.

Numberless fountains filled the garden, cooling the air, and the trees were thronged with singing birds, which made the place a very Eden, in which to while away the sultry hours of the day.

Half-reclining upon a willow settee, upon which were silken cushions, the Governor-General was sipping black coffee, eating a hard, sweet biscuit, called a *semilla*, and now and then giving a whiff at a *Regalia*—a cigar seldom seen away from Havana, and a luxury indeed to the smoker.

As the lady approached, the Governor threw away his cigar, and rising, met her with extended hand.

"Welcome, Senorita De Silva; this is indeed an honor. Be seated and express how I can serve you. By the way, allow me to thank you for your part in the capture of those pirates."

"It is of those pirates, as you call them, your Excellency, that I would speak—at least one of them," said Rena, firmly.

"How can the Senorita De Silva feel interest in a pirate, may I ask?" queried the Governor-General, in surprise.

"I feel the interest of gratitude toward one who rendered me a service I shall never forget. Your Excellency is aware of the capture of the vessel I came from Spain in, by Freelance, the buccaneer?"

"Yes, senorita, and that you recognized in the leader of these outlaws, one who served you; but what then, lady?"

"It is your intention, my father tells me, to have them all executed."

"It is; at sunrise to-morrow they shall be shot; taken as pirates they shall be shot without trial."

"There can be one exception, if your Excellency is so inclined to favor me."

"In anything but sparing the life of one of those wretches, yes, lady; but not in that, not in that."

"This is your firm decision, *Excellenza*?"

"It is—irrevocably."

Rena De Silva knew the Governor-General too well to urge more, and felt that her appeal was useless; but she did not yet despair.

"Still, your Excellency, you will permit me to visit the prisoner, and carry with me a holy father to cheer his last hours; you will not deny me this, senor?"

"Assuredly not, senorita; they certainly deserve all the consolation the *padre* can give them, for their sins have been great, and if the Senorita De Silva wishes to thank, in person, one who has, I admit, greatly served her, I will give her *carte blanche* to visit the Moro."

"Don Fernando will be only too happy to have the sunlight of so fair a face shine within its gloomy walls."

Unnoticing the compliment, Rena continued:

"One favor more, senor Excellency?"

"Name it, senorita."

"It is to give the poor doomed men a respite until to-morrow night, at sunset."

"Why, senorita? Better have the matter over with."

"No; let them die with the dying day, not with its beginning."

"You have some motive in this, senorita, I cannot fathom," and the Governor-General eyed her closely.

"A woman's motives, senor, are unfathomable," smiled Rena.

"Granted. From Father Adam to our day, no man ever fully understood a woman," laughed the Governor.

"We are discussing *men* now, senor; will you grant my request?"

"When I know what is the reason, senorita."

"That I cannot now tell, *Excellenza*; but it is a good one, and you are assuredly not afraid of a girl, that you refuse."

"A girl is a woman, senorita, and I am afraid of everything that wears a petticoat," and his Excellency laughed half-seriously.

Then, as if ashamed of his doubts, he continued:

"Certainly, senorita; it is only a few hours, more or less, and I will grant it; but when the wretches come to die in the evening they will be sorry they were not executed in the morning."

"True, and if led out in the morning, they

would wish to live until evening, your Excellency."

"Pointed reasoning without doubt. How else can I serve you, senorita?"

"By giving me the permit for myself and a *padre* to visit the Moro."

"Ah, yes, I will order it at once," and calling to a slave, dressed in muslin trousers and jacket, he bade him summon his *aide de-camp*.

The same officer who had ushered Rena into the presence of the Governor-General at once appeared.

"Senor Rafael, bid my secretary write a permit for the Senorita de Silva to visit the Moro, accompanied by one or more friends, for the purpose of seeing the pirates just incarcerated there."

The officer bowed, and soon returned with the permit, and placed a gold inkstand, and quill pen beside the Governor, who at once attached his name to the paper.

Thanking him, Rena arose and departed from the *Palacio*, and entering her *volante*, drove rapidly away into the heart of the city.

An hour after the same *volante* rolled beneath the massive gateway of the Castle El Moro, and drew up in front of the commandant's quarters.

From the vehicle descended a *padre* of the monkish order and the Senorita de Silva.

Don Fernando Miguel, Colonel-Commandant of the Moro, caught sight of the fair form, as he was just entering his quarters, and came hastily forward.

"Ah! the Senorita de Silva! Your slave, lady."

He bowed low before the beauty and heiress, for he was a bachelor, under forty, handsome and a marrying man, if—he could marry a fortune.

Rena bestowed upon the handsome Spaniard her sweetest smile, and said, in her most dulcet tones:

"Senor colonel, I have come to see one of your prisoners—"

"Would that I were he, lady, be he whom he may!" gallantly said the commandant.

"I thank you, senor; but as this man dies to-morrow it would not be pleasant to change places with him. I refer to Merle, the pirate officer—"

"Ah, the mutineer!"

"The same, senor; he saved me from a sad fate once, and in his distress I have come with a holy *padre* to cheer him by a few words."

"Your bright eyes, Senorita De Silva, would unlock my lowest dungeon, and though against orders—"

"But I have here the permit I received from the hand of the Governor-General himself."

"Ah, I had hoped you felt that with me I needed no order, senorita; I will send the guard after the—"

"Pardon, senor, I prefer to see him in his cell. I have a curiosity to behold the interior of this gloomy old pile. Ah! what troops of ghosts must throng these corridors at night," and Rena shuddered.

Calling a soldier the commandant bade him conduct the maiden and *padre* to the cells of the mutineers, for he felt that his presence was not desired.

Through interminable passages, gloomy and foreboding, down stone stairways, and far from the light of day, the guide led the way, until they came to a large room on the right.

"This is the guard-room, lady; we will find here the jailer of this tier of cells," and the soldier, excusing himself, soon returned with an old man, bearded and stern.

"Pedro, the senorita has orders from the commandant to you."

"Thy servant, lady," and the old jailer bowed.

"I would see Merle the Mutineer," quietly said Rena, shuddering at the dismal surroundings with which she was encompassed.

Silently the old man led the way along a narrow passage, stopped at an iron door, and taking a key from his belt placed it in the lock.

There was a dim light within the cell—not from the light of day, but from a lamp swinging in the passage.

Within, a tall form sat upon a low couch, his face buried in his hands; but at the grating of the key in the lock he looked up.

Quickly, as his eyes fell upon Rena, he sprung to his feet.

"You here, lady, here in this—I almost said hell on earth?" and there was a bitterness in the tones of the voice that bespoke a heart deeply moved.

"Yes; you served me once, and I have come to cheer your last hours on earth. Jailer, I will call you when I need you," and a purse of gold was thrust into the hand of the old man.

A gleam of joy flashed in his eyes, and he said, as he turned away:

"I will be within call, lady."

As soon as he had gone Rena closed the door and turned the key in the lock; then she confronted the prisoner, upon whose pale face the dim light, penetrating the iron grating of the door, rested.

"Senor, I begged for your life, but it was useless, and to-morrow at sunset you are doomed to die."

"So be it, lady; I do not fear death," calmly said Merle.

"But you must not die, for I am determined to save you."

"No, lady, you must not get yourself into trouble on my account."

"Listen, Senor Merle, since you saved my honor, nay, my life, for I would have died ere I became the bride of that vile man—"

"Pardon, senorita," and Merle spoke in the pure Castilian tongue. "Pardon, senorita, you exaggerate the danger you were in, for no harm would have befallen you, upon my honor; we captured your vessel, and the men demanded that you should be held for ransom, for some of them knew the wealth of your family."

"To this demand Captain Freelance demurred, until he saw that trouble would follow, and then he said he would hold you, and the cabin was to be kept inviolate to you, as long as you remained on the schooner."

"But I, who told you that the chief said you should remain, was moved by your piteous face, and demanded your release of Captain Freelance, by the love he held for me."

"He yielded, lady, paying from his own treasure box, the ransom demanded by the crew, and you sailed in the same vessel that had brought you from Spain. No, no, lady, Captain Freelance never wronged a woman, buccaneer though he was; he risked his life in the search for gold for which he did not care; but he was incapable of a mean action; he was a free-rover by force of circumstances, and for love of the wild life of danger, he led it; had you seen him you would have known it to be so, but he was wounded when your vessel was taken, and his first officer was in command."

Merle spoke with warm feeling in defense of his dead chief and father, and Rena believed his words, and replied:

"I am glad to know that Freelance was not as black as he was painted; still, you served me, and I have come to save your life, senor."

"How, lady, may I ask?"

"This holy monk is my friend—nay, I may as well tell all—he was my mother's lover, but, when he found she did not return his love, he left the world for the seclusion of the church, and he is willing to serve me for my mother's sake."

"And for your own, daughter," said the monk, in deep, yet not unmusical tones.

"Thanks, holy father, I feel that you will serve me, for you have proven it in coming here."

"Senor," and she again turned to Merle; "senor, you are about the height, and size, of the *padre* here, and it is my wish that you exchange clothing with him and leave these walls with me, for none will detect your disguise."

"And leave him here to suffer when the cheat is known?"

"Lady, you mistake me," and Merle spoke with offended pride.

"Nay, listen, no harm will befall the holy father."

"Lady, I know well the Governor-General—the *padre* would not be protected by his sacred position."

"Senor *Americano*," and the monk threw back his cowl, the act displaying a pale, manly, intelligent face.

"Senor *Americano*, years ago one of your countrymen saved my life in Spain, when I was attacked one night by an assassin."

"That debt is unpaid, and I wish to serve you, that I may owe no man anything; also, I would serve this maiden, and when she came to me to-day and proposed her plan I willingly consented to it, for I do not like to see any man die, especially one who has good in his heart, and only God knows what has driven you to the life you lead."

The monk spoke impressively, and Merle quickly rejoined:

"I am no pirate, as I could prove, were we sent home to be tried; nor, in the strict letter of the law, am I a mutineer. Listen, and I will prove that I am not the heinous criminal men call me."

In a few earnest words Merle told the story of his life, excepting the fact that he was the son of Freelance the Buccaneer, and the monk and the maiden listened, well knowing that he spoke the truth.

"Senor, you have been the toy of circumstances, and you were not intended to die as a felon. Here, take my priestly robes and leave this dismal place."

"No, I will not escape while another suffers."

"Senor, I will not suffer; before I am discovered to be other than yourself, the senorita will see the Governor-General, and to-night I will be secretly led from this cell."

Merle shook his head dubiously.

"Senor, I am more than I seem—I tell you no harm shall befall me."

Again Merle's answer was a shake of the head.

"Senor, I am a monk, yes; but I am also the brother of the Governor-General of Cuba."

The prisoner started, and Rena said quickly:

"Now, senor, that you know the holy father will be safe, you will not refuse my appeal?"

"Yes, lady; I will not escape and leave one

of the brave men who are my fellow-prisoners here to die."

Both Rena and the monk saw that Merle was determined, and they turned sadly away.

CHAPTER XXIV. A WOMAN'S PLOT.

As if wholly out of patience with Merle's refusal to fly from his fate, Rena De Silva and the monk turned from the cell; but outside in the passageway they halted, and held a conversation in a low tone, and in the Italian tongue, fearing some eavesdropper might be near, for Spanish walls are certainly blessed with ears.

"It is the only chance to save him, and a desperate one; we will see what we can do," said Rena; and turning to the prisoner, she continued:

"Be hopeful, senior; we are still your friends. We will see you again."

Calling the old jailer, who had been engaged in the delightful employment of counting his gold, the monk and the maiden retraced their way to the guard-room, where they were met by the soldier, who guided them back to daylight.

"Well, seniorita, you saw the mutineer?" asked the colonel commandant.

"Thank you, yes, senior, and I am coming again to see him; I do hope the Governor-General will spare his life."

"It is worth being a pirate to excite your sympathy, fair seniorita."

"Always given to pretty speeches, senior colonel; by the way, have you orders yet regarding the execution of these men?"

"Yes, seniorita, I just received them from the *Palacio*—they die to-morrow evening at sunset, and the marines of your noble father's vessel are to be their executioners, in honor of the cruiser having captured them."

"A public execution, senior?"

"Oh, yes, lady—we dare not cheat the Havana out of the show."

"Thank you, colonel; be good enough to give orders for mine and the *padre's* return to the cells of the prisoners, please."

"I will, lady."

"And, senior colonel, dine with my father and myself, on board ship, on the day after to-morrow."

"With pleasure, seniorita," said the delighted officer.

"You are a great sailor, seniorita; you spend half of your time on the cruiser, though you have the handsomest home in Havana."

"Yes, I love blue water, senior commandant. Remember your engagement. *Adios*."

The *volante* rolled away, and Rena said:

"I have now all the information desired, and we must work at once on our plan. You say the schooner lies right under the cliff, *padre*?"

"Yes, I observed it there in my early walk this morning; it is most hazardous indeed, yet it is the only chance."

"A desperate one; but any chance is better than none; did you tell the coachman where to drive?"

"I did."

In half an hour the vehicle drew up on the shore, and opposite a little indenture of the land, where several vessels were at anchor.

"That is the vessel I referred to, daughter," and the *padre* pointed to a graceful schooner-yacht, lying a cable's length from the shore.

"It has the American flag, flying—that is in our favor."

"I hope so—Ah, my man, do you belong on yonder yacht?" and the monk turned to a negro that approached, and who was attired in a blue sailor suit and tarpaulin.

It was no other than Dave, and a devout Catholic—as are many of the colored race on the Gulf shores. He turned and crossed himself with one hand, at sight of the monk, while he saluted Rena politely with the other.

By adroit questioning, Rena learned from Dave what had brought the yacht to Havana, and that Captain Grenville and the ladies were then in the city at a hotel, awaiting the arrival of the vessels that had been sent in pursuit of the mutineers.

To her joy also, Rena learned that Dave was a true friend of Merle, for he bitterly denounced Wilber Sebastian.

"You would do much to serve your young master, then?" asked Rena.

"I risk dis ole head o' mine, missy, to save one ob my massas, and I would do it to save massa Merle."

Rena turned to the *padre*, who did not speak English, and interpreted all that had been said, and the two conversed together for awhile.

Then Rena spoke again to Dave:

"You say that yacht belongs to your young master?"

"It do, missy, fact."

"If he were to board it suddenly, and tell you to put to sea, what would you do?"

"Obey him, missy! Wish he try me; but dey say he is to be shot, an' I jist lef' de hotel whar am massa, an' he mighty mad kase de Gub'nor-Gin'ral say he won't wait for de skunner to come back, but intends to hab massa Merle an' de oder gemmans all shot."

"He may, and he may not; but you say noth-

ing of our talk, and return on board your vessel."

"Yas, missy."

"Have the cable ready to slip, and the sails ready to run up in an instant, and be on the alert to-morrow—nay, all the time. Is the yacht a fast sailer?"

"Jist look at her, missy," and Dave pointed with conscious pride to the beautiful vessel.

"How many for a crew have you?"

"Dere's one nice young white man, Mister Ainslie, de mate, an' me, an' half a dozen niggers."

"All of them true to your young master?"

"De niggers is, missy; guess de mate would be, too."

"Very well, here is a little present for you. Remember, be on the watch," and slipping several pieces of gold into Dave's honest palm, the maiden bade the coachman drive down to the pier, in front of which lay her father's vessel.

Here Rena alighted, signaled a boat, and was rowed on board the cruiser, the *padre* awaiting ashore in the *volante* for her.

"Is my father on board, senior?" she asked of the officer who came after her in the boat.

"He is not, seniorita."

"And the *senor*, *Capitan Angelos*?"

"He is, lady."

"Bid him come to me in the cabin, please."

In a few moments the officer sent for, a captain of marines, entered, and found the maiden pacing the cabin nervously; her face was pale, excepting two red spots that burned upon either cheek.

He was a young man, under thirty, and with a tall, elegant form.

His face was very dark, handsome and full of character.

A dashing, splendid fellow, was Andrea Angelos, and one who had won his rank by gallantry, for he was a Cuban, and not a Spaniard, and upon that score Captain de Silva had objected to him as a suitor for his daughter's hand. As for Rena, she had shown him no more preference than she had a hundred others, and upon his offering himself, had refused him.

"Be seated, *Senor Capitan*."

"Not while you stand, seniorita."

Rena threw herself into an easy-chair, and the young officer followed her example.

"Senior, you once did me the honor of saying you loved me?" and the maiden's face now crimsoned.

"I told but the truth, seniorita."

"And now, senior?"

The officer seemed surprised; but he answered: "Time has but added to my love for you, seniorita."

"Will you prove your love for me, Andrea Angelos?"

"Ay, lady, that will I," was the eager response.

"You are honored, I believe, by being selected to execute the mutineers, on to-morrow afternoon?"

"I am, seniorita."

"The place of execution is the plateau outside of the city walls, and fronting on the sea?"

"It is, lady."

"Now, Andrea Angelos, listen to me, and if you do as I ask you, I promise to become your wife whenever you name the day."

Andrea Angelos sprang to his feet in delighted astonishment.

"Hear me. If you refuse, swear that you will not betray me in anything that I may do."

"I swear it, lady; how can I serve you? Name it, for I consent."

Rena De Silva leaned forward and whispered to the young officer a bold plan she had formed for the escape of Merle, the Mutineer.

"If that fails, he is lost," she said to the now surprised but delighted officer.

"And you have promised, *Senor Angelos*?"

"I have, by the sainted Virgin!"

"Then I shall keep my promise and become your wife. Now see me to my boat."

The young officer escorted the maiden to the waiting barge, and raised his hat as she rowed shoreward, a happy look upon his face, as he muttered:

"I would risk ten times as much for her, noble girl that she is!"

Had he heard the muttered words of Rena, as she left the vessel's side, he would have been even happier:

"It is no concession on my part to marry him, for I have loved him from the first time we met, and I only refused him because I did not wish to be yet bound by an engagement."

The *padre* was patiently awaiting her, and entering the vehicle it rolled off again toward the Moro.

Driving through the gateway the *padre* sprang from the *volante*, leaving the maiden within.

The permit of the Governor-General gained him at once permission to again visit the prisoner, and he was absent an hour, during which time Rena awaited him in the carriage, listening to the complimentary discourse of the colonel-commandant, who spied the De Silva livery on the coachman and came out.

"I have given the poor men what consolation I could, daughter."

It was the deep voice of the *padre* behind the commandant, who seemed reluctant that the holy father's spiritual advice had not continued longer.

"You saw him?" was the maiden's eager question as they drove away.

"Yes, and told him our plan."

"*Bueno!* and the others?"

"I visited the cell of each of the condemned, daughter, and they all know what to expect."

"Oh! how I thank you, and I will give to your Order a handsome golden souvenir. I do trust all may go well now."

"I hope so, daughter. The hour will be in their favor."

"Immensely; what strange feeling caused me to beg the Governor-General for a respite until sunset I cannot understand; I wanted to gain time, I suppose, for I had no other motive though he suspected me of having. Again let me thank you, and here I will leave you, and my carriage can drive you back to the monastery. *Adios*."

The maiden left the vehicle at the water's edge, and the priest was driven to his gloomy home in the abodes of a monastery.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE HAVANESE SURPRISED.

It was toward evening, of the day appointed for the execution of Merle the Mutineer, and his followers, and a perfect stream of eager humanity was flowing out of the city toward the place where the outlaws were to die.

Two hours before the time appointed, the level, green plateau, overhanging the outer harbor, was thronged with a curious crowd, who could only have their appetites satiated by the death of the pirates, for, like the Parisians, the Havanees enjoy a little blood-letting, especially if it tends toward the horrible.

A hollow space, a hundred yards square, was guarded by lines of soldiery, the sea side being left open, for here were the doomed men to stand to meet their death.

At length, as the sun's shadows grew longer and longer, the muffled roll of a drum and shrill notes of a fife were heard.

Nearer and nearer it came, and louder and louder the music sounded, pealing forth in a dirge.

Presently the head of the column came in sight ascending the hill—a squad of cavalry with an officer in brilliant uniform at their head. Then followed the Governor-General, mounted and surrounded by his brilliant and numerous staff, and behind these came a battalion of marines marching in hollow square and in their midst were the doomed men.

At the head of his marines was the *Senor Capitan*, Andrea Angelos, a little pale mayhap, but every inch the soldier.

Behind there came a number of citizens, on horseback and in carriage—the aristocracy of the city, for aristocrats love to see executions as well as do the *oi polloi*.

Among these vehicles were two, that may be selected as containing personages known to the reader, although the closed curtains hid the occupants from the view of the masses.

The first, with the livery of the De Silvas displaced for a plain suit, which the coachman wore, contained Rena De Silva—white, nervous, hopeful in her looks, yet dreading.

By her side rode her father. He disliked publicity at executions, and only attended because he knew the Governor-General would expect it, and his daughter had urged it.

Behind the De Silva coach came another carriage—the curtains closed.

The occupants of this vehicle were three in number—a gentleman and two ladies; none other than Captain Arthur Grenville, Estelle and Mildred.

These three were dreadfully pale, and Mildred's lips quivered with anguish, while she never took her eyes off the tall form walking so bravely in front of his men—the man upon whom every eye was turned, but who seemed almost unconscious of his being the object of general attention.

Perfectly calm, with steady step, upright mien, and fearless face, upon which there was a slight glow, walked Merle the Mutineer, winning the admiration of all who saw him thus marching to his doom.

Behind him came his men, forty-six in number, and with a bold front and plucky flash of the eyes, for men condemned to die.

"*Caramba!* as cool as icebergs—all of them."

Such was the universal opinion floating upon every lip of the dense crowd.

"Mildred, let me see that note again," and Arthur Grenville, holding forth his hand, as the plateau of execution came in view, received a crumpled paper, which Mildred had crushed in her tightly clenched fist.

"It certainly reads in such a way as to give us hope; had I not thought so, I should never have dragged you and Estelle hither, said Captain Grenville.

"Read it again, please," asked Mildred, faintly.

Opening again the paper he read aloud:

"Would the *Americanos*, who hold a deep interest in him that is called Merle the Mutineer, witness a

scene that will bring joy to their hearts, let them attend the execution, appointed to take place at sunset to-day.

"When entreaties failed to move the Governor-General to pardon, a plot was entered upon to save, which, even though with desperate risks, bids fair to meet success.

"A FRIEND OF MERLE THE MUTINEER."

"It is written in a bold hand, and I hope it is truthful," said the captain.

"Might it not be written by some one who was cruel enough to wish us to be here to witness the execution?" asked Estelle.

"No, I hardly think human nature can be so fallen as that. It was left by a priest at the hotel, the waiter said who handed it to me.

"Why any one in Havana should wish to save Merle, I cannot understand, for I know of no friends he has here excepting ourselves.

"If guilty of the charges made against him, and I admit appearances condemn him, much as I love him I would not stand between him and punishment; but I confess I do not like this high-handed act of the Governor-General, who would not listen to me when I requested that the prisoners be held to await the action of the United States, and the Deputy Consul here, in the absence of the Consul, had not the pluck to demand it."

"What excuse does the Governor-General give, Arthur?" asked Estelle.

"That they are pirates; took a Spanish vessel in Cuban waters, and hence are not entitled to a trial."

"There is the place of execution—oh, God! my heart will break!" cried Mildred.

Slowly, like the march of soldiers to the grave, moved the column now, the music breathing forth a plaintive requiem.

Nearer and nearer they approached the hollow square, the dense masses of humanity opening to let the procession pass, and a breathless silence over all.

Arriving at the designated spot the column came to a halt, and the marine guard was marched out of the line, the doomed men within the human and solid wall.

Halting his men, Captain Angelos was about to give the order to the condemned mutineers to march into position, when Merle, saluting him, and with a ringing voice, heard by all, commanded his crew to take their stands on the death-line.

"*Santissima Maria!* what splendid pluck that young buccaneer has," cried the Governor-General to Don Fernando Miguel, the commandant of El Moro.

"Magnificent! and his example makes his men show almost equal nerve, your Excellency," was the reply.

As the men marched to the death-line, some twenty paces from the cliff, which overhung the harbor, Merle glanced quickly around him—to seaward, toward the city, down upon the harbor, and then one sweeping glance at the immense sea of faces, and the wall of soldiery keeping back the curious, eager crowd.

As the marines faced the long, single line of doomed men, Merle stepped forward, and again saluting Captain Angelos, took his position at the right of his crew, while in a loud voice he cried:

"We are ready, senor!"

Not a sound was now heard, in all that vast multitude; every man and woman felt their hearts stand still in expectancy, and the deep roll of the muffled drums made them start.

"Attention, battalion!"

The command was in the ringing voice of Andrea Angelos, addressing his two hundred marines, honored by their selection as the executioners.

As they came to "attention," another order was heard; but not in Spanish, and it thrilled through every heart, as in ringing tones Merle, the Mutineer, commanded:

"Ready, all! For your lives follow me!"

Then, with a few mighty bounds, the brave man leaped clear of the cliff, and down, down he went, sheer forty feet into the sea, while above him the air was filled with flying forms, as his whole crew followed him over the dizzy height.

Above them resounded wild yells of alarm, the shouts of officers to their men, and then the rapid and scattering rattle of musketry as the marines poured in their fire.

But every man of the mutineer crew passed over the cliff alive, though a few, losing their presence of mind, fell headlong into the water and were stunned.

Coming to the surface, after going down deep, Merle struck out boldly toward his own beautiful yacht, that was lying at anchor not half a cable's length from him, and as his men arose they quickly followed him, several of whom, unable to swim, were supported by their comrades.

There seemed a show of resistance on the yacht; but a dozen men leaped upon it, and Merton Ainslie and his black crew were driven pellmell into the cabin and locked in, not at all unwilling prisoners, for Dave had told the mate and his companions "somet'in' mighty fine was goin' ter happen."

One glance at the cliff, as his men sprung to

the sails, and Merle saw it crowded with a wildly excited crowd, while upon the deck and water spattered the bullets of the infuriated Spanish soldiery, whose very excitement caused them to fire at random.

Two minutes after they struck the water the greater part of the bold fugitives, encouraged by the voice of Merle, had reached the yacht, the cable was slipped, the sails let fall, and the swift vessel forged ahead just as the last disk of the sun disappeared beyond the horizon.

"How many, Buntline?" called out Merle, as he took the helm and headed for the open sea.

"Thirty, sir."

"Sixteen gone! thank Heaven there are no more. If the muskets of the marines had been loaded with ball, not half of us would have reached the yacht.

"Ha! old Moro, we have to run your gantlet now! Never mind, we will do it, for you cannot reach us."

And the fleet vessel glided swiftly out to sea, under clouds of canvas, leaving behind her, a scene of the wildest excitement the surprised Havanese had ever known.

So great was the confusion that it was some time before order could be formed out of chaos, and officers dispatched to the harbor, to order every armed vessel there in pursuit.

"Ah, senor! will you kindly give me a seat in your carriage? My father, Captain De Silva, has driven off without me to go in pursuit of the mutineers."

It was Rena De Silva that spoke, and she addressed Arthur Grenville; but she did not tell him that she had *purposely* left her carriage that she might thus meet the American friends of Merle.

"Certainly, senorita! I observed you in the carriage just in advance of us. I have a seat at your disposal," and he offered the maiden his arm and led her to his carriage, where, asking her name, he presented her to his wife and to Mildred.

"Oh, sir, what of him?" cried Mildred, her hands clasped and outstretched toward him.

"He is safe, and fully half his men escaped with him."

"Are you *certain* he was not hurt?"

"If you mean the leader, senorita, I saw him distinctly with my glass; he seemed unharmed; but what a daring escape!" said Rena, with a look of admiration at Mildred's beautiful face.

"Thank God!" and the maiden sunk back on her seat and covered her face with her hands, while Arthur Grenville, replying to Rena, said:

"It was a most marvelous escape indeed. They deserve to elude their pursuers and doubtless will. Where can I drive you, senorita?"

The senorita gave the address of her home, and there Captain Grenville left her, she thanking him most warmly for his kindness to her.

Dropping Estelle and Mildred at the hotel, Captain Grenville drove rapidly down to the harbor, for he was anxious to see how quickly pursuit would be made, and he sincerely hoped that the yacht would escape, as Mildred's strong faith in Merle had caused him to think him less in the wrong than Wilber Sebastian had represented.

It was late when he returned to the hotel, but he found Mildred and Estelle awaiting him.

"Tell me, please tell me the result," cried Mildred, anxiously.

"Most favorable, and remarkable! First to the favorable part—the yacht has two hours' good start of her pursuers, five in number, and they will have to beat out of the harbor, which gives her another great advantage, while the night has come up cloudy, is very dark, and Merle is sailor enough, with all this in his favor, to elude the whole Spanish fleet."

"Heaven, I thank thee!" cried Mildred, while Estelle bit her lip with apparent vexation.

"Now to the remarkable part. A boat from the yacht came in while I was at the pier."

"A boat!" exclaimed Mildred and Estelle in a breath.

"Yes, and it contained none other than our faithful Dave, who told me he knew of the intended escape, because Merle had powerful friends at work for him, and who had come down to the beach, examined the position of the yacht, and told him to have her ready to sail at a moment's notice. This is all that Dave knew, or at least would tell me."

"But he was on board when Merle sprung over the cliff?"

"Yes, and when fairly under way Merle ordered Dave into the gig, told him to row back to Havana, and tell me that Merton Ainslie should return with the yacht within two weeks' time. To you, Mildred, he sent word not to lose trust in him, for all would yet come well."

"I believe it! I know it, Captain Grenville, and, like Merle, I will bide my time."

His promise to captain Grenville Merle faithfully kept, for ere the two weeks had passed, Merton Ainslie returned in the yacht, having landed the daring fugitives at a certain point on the Mexican coast, they having successfully eluded their pursuers.

The next day the little yacht sailed for home; but Mildred's face no longer wore the haggard, anxious look that had rested there of late, for Merton Ainslie had brought her a letter from

Merle, telling her that ere many days he would be with her, and to judge him not until she heard all. But:

"Man proposes—
God disposes."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A STARTLING RENCONTRE.

WHEN the morning broke, following the disappointment to the Havanese, in missing the execution, the little yacht, loaded deep with the large crew she bore, was bounding along, many leagues from the gun-guarded harbor from which it had taken flight.

At the helm stood the daring leader, a mere boy in years, yet a man with few equals.

Only a few days before his face had been bright with ambitious hope, and as calm as a cloudless sky, for the future was opening to him on his favorite field, the sea, and he felt that he might yet win a name famous among his fellow-men.

A short week, and a name had been won; but ah! how different from his hopes.

Now he was branded as a mutineer, a deserter from the navy, and even the name of *pirate* was hurled upon him, and he was a fugitive."

Had he been alone he would have faced the consequences without fear; but these men were under his protection, those who had rebelled on his account, and the die was cast that bound his fortune with those brave fellows, for he would not desert them; hence he made no plea for himself, and haughtily refused to fly, when freedom was offered to him, unless his companions went with him.

The good *padre*, who had gone to each man in his cell, had told him, when he made known the plan of escape, desperate as it was, but the only one, how their chief had refused to desert them, and their love for him was riveted with links that could never be broken—they would follow him to the utmost ends of the earth, through all dangers that might beset them.

No word had he held with them, when led from their cells in the gloomy Moro; only a glance into each stern face, as he walked down the line, and what they saw in his fearless eyes gave them hope, and even when facing their doom, they had patiently awaited his command.

Each knew, for his eyes showed him all, the desperate chances for escape; but before them lay certain death, only a few seconds removed, and over the cliff, down into the dark waters, a hope of life confronted them, and the reader has seen how they faced the alternative, not a man shrinking from the dizzy leap.

True, a third of their number had gone to their death in the attempt, and a dozen of those who had reached the yacht were wounded, some slightly, some painfully, and some mortally; but all had run the same chances, and the fortunate ones, in bewailing the fate of their comrades, could not but congratulate themselves.

Thus, as the lights of Havana grew dim in the distance, and their fleet vessel bounded along, after having set the faithful Dave adrift in the gig, on his mission to Arthur Grenville, the brave seamen formed a line, and marching aft each grasped, in his turn, the hand of Merle.

No words were spoken, only that silent grasp of the hand, and it told volumes, far more than words could have done.

When the morning light came, no sail was visible upon the horizon—the fleet yacht had either outrun all pursuit, or the pursuers had gone off on another course, and the men who had been so near death the day before breathed freely, and from their lips burst one long, loud shout of joy.

But Merle still stood at the helm, pale, haggard, and his splendid eyes filled with a deeper gloom than had ever before haunted them, while upon his beardless face rested a look hard to fathom. There was a stern *threat* in it, and those who saw him felt that a day of reckoning would come.

The humiliation of the lash had not broken his proud spirit, and if he suffered pain from the gashes in his flesh, he showed no sign of it; but calmly attended to his duty, and directed the destiny of his vessel and those under him.

One request he had made of his followers, at the time he had left Dave in his boat dancing astern upon the waters, and that was that not one of them should make known to Merton Ainslie, or the crew of the yacht, a single circumstance that had occurred upon the schooner, and they had promised.

From Merton Ainslie he learned why the yacht had come in pursuit—driven by the demand, rather than the request, of Mildred Monteith, and from what the young mate told him, he felt assured that the maiden held suspicion against Wilber Sebastian.

Now, as he stood at the helm, one of the men came to him and said:

"Shipmate Jack is in a bad way, sir, and wants to let loose his tongue-tackle with you, if so it please you."

"Jack Buntline?"

"Yes, sir; he was wounded in our little fly, an' he seems uncommon bad."

"I will go at once; Mr. Ainslie, will you

take the helm? Keep her as she is, east by south-east."

A moment after Merle stood by the side of the honest seaman, who had been placed in the cabin.

"Well, lad, are you in a bad way?" he asked, kindly, grasping the hand of the sailor.

"Yes, capt'in, I'm about shippin' my cable, sir, an' I hopes to head straight for the port o' Heaven, seein' as how Capt'in Christ hain't goin' ter be too hard on a poor salt-water sinner, as hadn't had the Gospil log-book read ter him much, an' is only a poor sailor."

"Jack, I hope it is not as bad as that; let me see your wound?" and Merle bent over him.

"It's atween wind and water, sir, right in my bread magazine, an' I know as how I've got to strike my flag on this cruise."

The wound was through the body, and Merle felt that the man was already dying, and, while his voice trembled, he said, in earnest tones:

"That should have struck me, Jack, and not you, for I caused you to suffer as you do."

"Now haul in lively, capt'in, on that kind o' slack, kase it's not hittin' the hull or riggin' o' truth, beggin' yer pardon, sir; but we was ter be lashed so that every man 'on ther skunner would ha' looked like the stars an' stripes, sir, in less than a week, ef you hadn't let fly that tongue shot at that onhuman brute, as is Capt'in Sebast'in."

"He seemed crazed with his power, Jack, and I spoke when I could remain silent no longer; I was not reared in the navy, to keep my tongue between my teeth, and my eyes closed, while a cruel commander flayed his crew alive; but that is past now, and the end has come, and we are fugitives upon the waters, because I spoke as I did."

"You was a man, sir, an' you proved it, an' ef I'd 'a' died fer it, I wouldn't ha' seen you hit another blow. As 'twas, ef yer'd only said ther word yer back would never ha' seen a scar."

"I know it, my faithful friend; but tell me, is there nothing I can do to cheer your last hours? for Jack, old fellow, you are near your end."

"I know it, capt'in; but I think I has left ther breakers ahind me, fer it looks like plain sailin' ahead; ther's moonlight on the waters, an' ther Pilot has got me in han', an' I'm steerin' straight ter port, an' must drop anchor soon an' report ter ther Admiral aloft."

The man's mind seemed wandering for an instant, but quickly recovering himself he said:

"Capt'in, you knows, sir, that I was one o' ther men in ther barge as capsized, one evenin' near your home, an' twice you saved my life, an' ther life o' thet Capt'in Sebast'in, an' it's thet what made him hate you, I'm thinkin', as yer proved yerself a better sailor then as was hisself."

"Now, capt'in, I overheard him lettin' run his tongue one night in ther cabin o' ther skunner, an' Lufften't Alden an' thet blasted pill man—"

"Surgeon Bethune, Jack?"

"Yes, sir, they was all in there tergither, an' grog was so plentiful ther in'ards was all afloat, which made ther tongues go back an' fill like a ship as had no rudder, an' yerself was ther enemy as they was arter, kase yer had not only saved ther life o' Capt'in Sebast'in, but yer had cut him out o' ther beauty as he was headin' fer, with a view o' splicin' with her in wedlock, bein' as how her parents had left her more money then a fleet's purser has got on pay-day."

"Now you run across ther bows, capt'in, an' from that day he hated you, as did his sister too, kase the grog made him let out as how she wanted ter marry you herself, an' was mad as a sea-cook, when you loved t'other clipper."

"Can this be true, Jack?" asked Merle, with intense surprise.

"It are as true as ther log-book o' God, sir, an' what is more, she planned with her brother ther git yer out o' ther way, an' I heard ther grog-suckers say as how they'd make it entertainin' fer yerself when they got you in blue water, an' ef yer comed back, to git ther purty clipper as a consort, it w'u'd surprise them."

"So I goes to see ther leddy, bein' as how I couldn't git word ter yerself, an' she was away from her home, but I writ her a epistle, seein' as how her nigger gi'n me her address, for which same I gi'n him five dollars o' lawful money, an' the day we sailed I writ her ag'in, as I couldn't run athwart yerself fer a talk, an' that is how the yacht come to foller in our wake, as I hear'n ther young mate tell yer last night, 'cause that leetle gal is a uncommon saucy cruiser, when she gits ready fer action, an' we'd ha' seen fun had ther yacht caught ther skunner, I'm thinkin'."

"But what motive had Sebastian for all this animosity toward me?"

"He was ter come back and marry yer consort as was to be."

Merle started; he knew now why Wilber Sebastian had offered him the lieutenancy, and then acted as he did; it was to remove him as a rival from his path!

"That man and myself shall yet meet again, Jack—I have sworn it."

"I hope so, an' ef I kin git a leave o' ther Admiral aloft, I'll cruise down in speerit an' see yer; tackle him, sir; but my cable's slippin' fast

an' I wishes ter ax yer ef yer'll bury me decent-like in deep blue water, an' when yer is cruisin' long quiet with yer pretty consort, will ther two o' yer some time speak a kind word of old Jack Buntline, an' sling a prayer aloft ter ther Admiral, ter gi'n me as easy a berth as He can convenient do, bein' as how I'm a stranger ter Him."

"Jack, Jack, my noble fellow, you shall never be forgotten by me, and when I strike Wilber Sebastian I will make the blow stronger for your sake."

"I'm uncommon glad ter hear yer say so, capt'in, an' I'll make bold ter tell ther Admiral, through His Son, Capt'n Christ, all I knows about thet sea-sarpint, Sebastian, so as how he'll never git into ther port o' Heaven. 'Tain't right nobow fer him ter think he kin drap anchor on t'other side o' God's equator; but gi'n my han' a squeeze, cap'in, fer somehow I hain't got no grip now, bein' as how Death has run me afoul."

Grasping the honest hand Merle sat by the side of the dying hero, listening to his rambling talk until his voice grew fainter and fainter, and, with four words his lips ceased to move, for upon them Death had placed his great seal.

Those four last words upon the lips of Jack Buntline, and breathed out in a clear, stern tone, were:

"Let fall the anchor!"

True to his promise, Merle had the humble seaman buried in the deep sea, the yacht being brought to at midnight for the purpose, and the youth reciting the service for the dead over the body, ere it was launched into the blue depths of the Gulf.

A few days more and, in the darkness of night, the yacht ran into the harbor of Vera Cruz, and, bidding adieu to Merton Ainslie and the faithful negro crew, Merle and his followers went ashore, leaving the fleet vessel to run back to Havana as he had promised it should.

Upon landing in the city, Merle saw his faithful comrades comfortably cared for in sailor boarding-houses, and giving to each of them a few dollars, for he had plenty of money with him, he bade them farewell, after a few words of advice, for them to ship on the first outward-bound vessels on which they could get berths, and, upon their arrival in the United States to immediately communicate with him, by letter at New Orleans, for it was his intention to bring charges against Wilber Sebastian, and then to stand his trial for mutiny upon the high seas.

Seeking a hotel, which he had noticed on several other visits to Vera Cruz, Merle secured pleasant quarters, and, for the first time since leaving New Orleans in the schooner, threw himself down to find an untroubled rest.

It was late in the day when Merle arose, and after a substantial breakfast, strolled forth for a walk, and to secure other clothing, for he was still attired in his uniform as a naval officer.

Having dressed himself in the picturesque suit of a Mexican *ranchero* he went on a voyage of discovery through the town and learned that Wilber Sebastian had sailed from Vera Cruz the day before, for Havana, in company with the cutter that had also been sent in pursuit of him.

While he was gleaning these particulars, the Castle of San Juan de Uloa thundered a salute to an armed vessel just coming into the harbor.

"It is the Isabella, the cruiser of Captain De Silva; he was close on my wake."

"I must be careful for a few days."

So saying, Merle went to see about the fugitive crew, and place them on their guard, and found that a number of them had already shipped on vessels bound for the United States, and the others expected soon to follow.

Warning them of their danger if recognized by any of the crew of the Isabella, Merle retraced his way to his hotel and sought his room; but he was anxious to see what was said of him in the United States, and went out to get a New Orleans paper.

A vessel had just arrived, and bringing with it late papers, one of which he secured, and hesitated in the plaza to read the headings, while a bitter smile crossed his face:

"MERLE, THE MUTINEER!"

"An American Naval officer Leads a Mutiny on his Vessel, kills those who oppose him and turns Pirate."

"THE MUTINEERS CAPTURE A SPANISH VESSEL!"

"They are taken by the Spanish Sloop-of-war Isabella!"

"THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL CONDEMNES THEM TO DIE!"

"Merle, the *protege* and adopted son of Captain Arthur Grenville, formerly a distinguished officer of our Navy, has been the perpetrator of a high-handed outrage upon the high seas."

"Formerly lieutenant under the famous *Free-lance*, the *Buccancer*, though but a boy in years, he—"

"Senor, that is of too much interest to you to read in public."

Merle started and turned quickly; in the absorbing interest of what he read, he had forgotten that he stood in the public court of the hotel.

As his eyes were raised from the paper they fell upon the handsome face of Andrea Angelos, the man who had been appointed his executioner!

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MONTE PRINCE.

UPON recognizing who it was that stood before him, Merle was astounded, and his first thought was to strike Captain Angelos to the earth and then make his escape; but he saw a kindly look in the Cuban's face, who, after his warning, bowed and passed on.

Merle at once sought his room, and throwing himself into a chair began to meditate as to what was best to be done, for he felt that it would soon be known to others that he was in the hotel.

Just then there came a tap upon his door, and, rising, with his hand upon a pistol, for he was determined not to be taken without a desperate resistance, he said, calmly:

"Come in!"

The door swung on its hinges and the elegant form and handsome face of Captain Angelos were visible; but no Spanish guard followed him.

"Enter, senor! In what way can I serve you?"

The Cuban obeyed, turned the key in the lock and came forward ere he replied:

"By not being so reckless as to expose yourself again, with Spanish officers in Vera Cruz on your track."

"You are kind, senor, very kind; why is it I do not find in you an enemy?"

"For several reasons, sir; first, I have heard the story of your life from the lips of the Senorita De Silva."

"Ha!"

"Yes, she visited you in your cell in the Moro, and I will be frank with you, and tell you that she is my promised wife."

"Once you did her a favor, and Rena De Silva is one who would never forget a kindness, or forgive an injury, and hence it was she tried to save you from death, when she recognized in you one who had served her more than words can express."

"The senorita, and you, senor, are kind to think so; the service I rendered has been repaid a hundred times over."

"It was repaid as best the senorita could repay it, but she dreaded the risk you ran, senor. By the Sainted Apostles! but I never saw a bolder, braver deed than your escape. Your hand, Senor Merle, for mine is offered as man to man, notwithstanding a few days since I faced you as your executioner."

Merle readily grasped the Cuban's hand, and said, quietly:

"The senorita planned the escape, and circumstances aided in carrying it out; now that all is over it seems very easy of accomplishment."

"It is modest in you to say so; you had sail on the yacht in two minutes, and gained hours' start of us—that is from the time when we got to an offing, where we could lay our course as you did."

"And I owe it, in a great measure, to Captain Andrea Angelos that we escaped; the muskets of his marines were not loaded?"

"With ball, no, and I'll be joked on the poor marksmanship of my men; but, let that go; they did not know the cheat, for I drew the bullet out of every gun myself—hold, senor, I did it selfishly, I assure you, for the Senorita Rena begged it of me as a favor to her; how could I refuse?"

"I do not wonder that you would do anything for that noble woman, senor, and I will remember her until my life ends; nor will you be forgotten, Senor Angelos, as I owe much to you."

"The *padre* told me that the muskets of the marines were not to be loaded, and in this was our greatest hope of escape, as it was some time before the other troops present could be brought up to fire on us."

"With how many men did you escape, senor, may I ask?"

"I reached the yacht with thirty out of forty-seven, including myself; five, of the badly wounded, have since died—twenty-five of us landed here."

"It thrills me to think of it. Now, Senor Merle, I hope you intend returning to the United States to prosecute your commander, for the Senorita De Silva, as I told you, made me aware of all that had happened."

"Yes, I intend to bring charges against Captain Sebastian, and I doubt not but that I can break him of his commission; but then I will settle with him personally," and a dangerous gleam flashed in the speaker's eyes.

"He deserves the worst punishment you can inflict upon him," and the two were silent for a moment.

Then Merle asked:

"Did you come here in search of me and my men?"

"Yes, senor; we were in a fog as to which course you had taken, and Captain De Silva headed at once to Vera Cruz, though I do not think he was very anxious to overhail you."

"It was kind of him."

"No, he remembers your service to his daughter; but that does not weigh with the other officers of the *Isabella*, and you must remain concealed while we are in port."

"If captured, you intended demanding us of the Mexicans?"

"Yes, señor, and they would be glad to give you up, believing you to be pirates."

"I landed and came at once to see if aught could be ascertained regarding you, and learned that you had not put into Vera Cruz; but five minutes after I saw you in the hotel plaza. I am glad others did not see you too; how are you registered?"

"As Don Merlino, *ranchero* of Corpus Christi."

"*Bueno!* and your disguise beams you out; but your face and form once seen, señor, are not soon forgotten, and you must have a care; also, you have enemies here, for you know it has been published that you were one of the lieutenants of *Freelance the Buccaneer*—the paper you have there says as much—and your chief was not popular with the present Mexican Government. I heard that much discussed by citizens, and you will, if found here, be taken as a traitor to Mexico, and then your doom is sealed; better leave soon for the United States," and the noble-hearted Cuban arose to go.

"A glass of wine together, *Señor Angelos*, and believe me ever your friend."

"To the noble *Señorita De Silva*, present my homage—I owe her more than thanks; one of these days I trust we may meet again."

A toast to the future was drank in a full bumper, and the two men, so strangely met, parted, to meet again—when, and where?"

For some days Don Merlino, *ranchero*, from Corpus Christi, did not leave his rooms at the hotel, but then he learned from Boots, the servant in attendance on him, that the *Isabella* had sailed, as had also two other Spanish cruisers, that had touched at Vera Cruz in search of the daring mutineers.

Boots also obtained for Merle the papers, as they arrived from the United States and Havana, and by these he saw how he was looked upon at home and abroad.

He also learned that Wilber Sebastian had been ordered back to the United States.

"Now is my time: Boots, when does the next packet sail for New Orleans?"

Boots was not certain, but would find out.

"To-morrow, señor, at turn of tide, which will be at noon," was his report.

"Very well, thank you," and seeing that it was getting late in the evening, Merle concluded he would go down to the public *café* for a glass of wine and cigar before retiring.

As he crossed the hotel plaza, he saw a man whom he remembered having seen before, the day of his arrival in Vera Cruz, and who had then seemed to regard him attentively.

Entering the *café* he ordered a bottle of wine and some cigars, and seated himself at a table to enjoy them.

The man, whom he had before observed, came leisurely into the saloon, and joined an officer in gorgeous uniform at another table.

"Waiter, who are those gentlemen, at the table opposite?" quietly asked Merle.

"The one in uniform, señor, is the Major Vistal Guarena, the adjutant of the *Castle San Juan de Uloa*."

"And the other?"

"The *caballero*? He is Don Felipe Cosala."

"His business?"

"A monte-player; *caramba!* señor, he is called the Prince of Monte—his luck never fails him."

Merle gazed beneath his brows at the two men, impelled by some strange motive to read their faces.

The one, whom he was confident was watching him, and whom the waiter had called Don Felipe Cosala, the Monte Prince, was a large man for a Mexican, if Mexican he was.

He was fully six feet in height, broad-shouldered, well-dressed as a Mexican gentleman, and had black hair and eyes, and a face that was dark as an Indian's; it was a face that Merle did not like, and which he felt he had somewhere seen before, when, or where he could not recall; it was a face to be feared by men and women alike.

The other was a young officer, with long black hair, a restless eye, and dissipated face—otherwise he would have been handsome.

He was richly-dressed in uniform, and his rank was that of a major of Mexican artillery.

For some moments the two talked together in a low tone and then the gambler arose and left the saloon, not even noticing Merle as he passed out.

"Major Vistal Guarena's compliments señor, and begs you will join him in a bottle of wine," and the waiter who had been in attendance upon the officer stood before Merle.

It was his first thought to decline; but some impulse he could not understand bade him accept, and he arose and crossed to the table where sat the officer, who bowed politely and said:

"I am Vistal Guarena, Major of Artillery, señor, and I beg, as a stranger in our city, that you join me in a bottle of wine. Whom have I the honor of addressing?"

"Don Leon Merlino, a *ranchero*, señor," quietly responded Merle, seating himself at the table.

After awhile the two arose, having enjoyed a very friendly chat together, and the Mexican said, carelessly:

"Must you leave me, señor, or will you accompany me to throw luck in my favor?"

"Whither?"

"To a monte saloon. I have lost heavily of late, maledictions upon my luck."

Merle consented, and arm in arm the two entered one of those Mexican gambling-halls, so frequently found in that sunny land.

The room was passably well filled; but all present were too busy in tempting the little god of Fortune, to particularly notice their entrance, though several bowed to the Mexican, and Merle overheard one remark:

"Vistal Guarena lost ten thousand *pesos* last night—the prince will get his last dollar."

A moment after the two stood by a table before which sat the man whom Merle had seen in the *café*—Felipe Cosala.

He nodded to Guarena, glanced at Merle, and went on with his game.

"That is our prince of gamblers, señor—luck never fails him, as I know to my cost, for I have tried hard to break it without success; do you play?"

"It depends upon my humor, señor," was the quiet response.

"Perhaps you may conquer the prince, were you to try."

"I will try," was the calm reply, and taking a bill at bills from his pocket Merle laid them upon the table.

Felipe Cosala looked up with a gleam in his eye, while he calmly:

"Will the *señor* play alone with me?"

"Yes."

"The stake is large—that I play for."

"Make it what you will."

"One thousand *pesos*."

"I am satisfied," was Merle's quiet rejoinder, and the game began.

Don Felipe won; but Merle renewed the stake, and again lost.

"You are playing against one whose luck never fails, señor," said Don Felipe, with a smile.

"I am playing against a professional gambler; men call him the Monte Prince," was the calm rejoinder.

All around the table started; Felipe Cosala was feared by every one who knew him.

They expected to see Merle fall dead in his tracks for his bold words; but Don Cosala only smiled, and the game progressed steadily until Merle had lost every *peso* he had—five thousand in all.

"The señor is satisfied, I hope?" said Don Felipe, with a revengeful sneer.

"Oh, no, I stake this against the sum I have lost and its equal."

As he spoke Merle took from his finger the gold band, with its solitaire diamond—that which he had taken from the treasure-box of the schooner, and which had been often worn by *Freelance the Buccaneer*.

The eyes of the Monte Prince sparkled; they were the only feature of his face that ever showed any feeling; otherwise the man's face seemed cast in bronze.

"It is worth more than that sum, señor," said Don Felipe, glancing at the splendid stone.

"At what do you value it?"

"Twenty-five thousand *pesos*."

"We will play for that sum—the ring against the twenty-five thousand *pesos*."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

UNMASKED.

WHEN Merle, or Don Merlino, as he was called in Vera Cruz, coolly said, in answer to the remark of the Monte Prince, that he would play for the value of the ring, twenty-five thousand *pesos*, his words created the greatest excitement in the saloon, or hall, and the players scattered about, left their games to watch the fortune of the young stranger.

The Monte Prince at once put the value of the ring upon the table, and the game began and ended—Merle had again lost.

But his face did not change color; he even smiled, and said:

"Your name is certainly deserved, señor; will you play again?"

"For what stake?"

"Any amount you desire to name," was the cool rejoinder.

"Ha! that sounds well; you are plucky and have plenty of nerve," declared the gambler.

"I ask for no personal comments. Will you play again?"

The swarthy face darkened, and he answered slowly:

"I will play you a game of cards for any stake you desire."

"Agreed. You have there my ring and five thousand *pesos*, won from me—value, thirty thousand; suppose we make it five times that sum."

Every man drew his breath; the amount was fabulous to be gambled for.

Who was this stranger who had just lost the

sum of thirty thousand *pesos*, and was willing to risk again, upon the turn of a card, five times that amount?

Such was the question of many, and Major Guarena, who had been seen with him, was asked by numbers who was his friend.

But he knew not, and with painful interest he drew nearer the table.

There was now just the shadow of a tremor in the hands of the Monte Prince as he shuffled the cards; but his face was calm, his eyes burning.

As for Merle, he quietly lighted a cigar, and offered one to the gambler, who refused it; then he turned to the Mexican officer:

"Will you smoke, Major Guarena?"

"No. I am too anxiously watching the result of this princely game to be played, for I suppose you will play, Cosala?"

"Of course! The stake is one hundred and fifty thousand *pesos*, señor, I believe?"

"Yes; more if you like."

"Would oblige you if I could, but I can handle just that sum, with a little over for a nest-egg, if I lose; the bank, here, will back me for what I have not on my table."

"What collateral do you offer, for of course you carry not a fortune like that with you?"

Merle placed his hand in the breast of his jacket, and, after a moment tossed upon the table what appeared, at first, to be a handful of sparks.

But it took the shape of a diamond necklace and ruby anchor—treasures already seen by the reader.

Each stone was of immense size and without a flaw, and the eyes of the Monte Prince sparkled like fire as he took them in his hand.

"Is it your intention to separate these, señor?"

"No, I play them against all you are worth."

"Their value is far beyond—"

"It matters not; if you win, it is your game; if you lose, you have lost a fortune," was the calm reply.

The Monte Prince simply bowed, and the game commenced, Merle perfectly cool, in fact indifferent, and his antagonist in the game of chance growing more nervous as it progressed.

At length the game ended, and a wild shout broke from the spectators—the Monte Prince had lost!

But Merle dragged not his winnings toward him at once, and his hand again went into the breast of his jacket.

Instantly it was drawn forth, and there was a gleam of light in it as it descended with lightning speed and iron force.

It followed a shriek of pain, and the Monte Prince would have sprung from his seat; but his right hand was pinioned to the table by the hand of a knife thrust through it, and deep into the wood.

Before the swarthy face of the Monte Prince was the gleaming muzzle of a small pistol held in the hand of Merle, while his deep voice commanded silence.

"Senors, this man is a trickster, as I will prove to you. *Señor Guarena*, will you kindly take from the coat-sleeve, which my knife holds on the table, the cards secreted there?"

But the Mexican officer never moved, and a breathless silence reigned upon all present, while the eyes of the Monte Prince glared like a tiger's, and the pinioned hand bled in its own blood.

"Do you fear to ask, señor?" and Merle's eyes flashed upon the Mexican officer, who yet stood silent and pale, making no sign of compliance with the request.

"*Señor Vistal Guarena*, you are a coward, and unworthy of your uniform," said Merle, in deep, stern tones.

"What, señor? By the Virgin, you shall prove your words," shouted the Mexican officer, furiously.

"At any time and place you desire; now stand aside and let some *brave* man do as I request. Will you, señor?"

The person addressed was a young man, handsome, well-attired, and evidently a gentleman.

Without a word he stepped forward and did as directed, the Monte Prince glaring to move, for he knew that the man who had driven a knife through his hand would gladly, as willingly send a bullet through his heart, and he loved life.

From the sleeve of the gambler the young Mexican took out a pack of cards, and dealt them to the one with which the game had been played.

"Senors, you see how he has cheated all who have played with him?"

"In the last game I watched him too close for him to deceive me, and I won."

"Now, sir," and he turned to the Monte Prince, "do you see any one among these who is with whom you have ever played?"

"Does that concern you?" asked Don Felipe, foaming with pain and fury.

"So much that I will send a bullet through your brain if you do not answer," was the stern reply.

"Yes."

"Call each one by name."

With a muttered malediction the gambler obeyed, and a score of those present were named out.

"Name the amount won from the man who

man," and Merle pointed toward the young Mexican who had taken the cards from the sleeve of the Monte Prince.

"Three thousand pesos."

"Is that correct, senor?"

"It is," answered the young Mexican.

"Do me the kindness to take the amount from that pile on the table."

"Good God!" and the Monte Prince spoke in English, but instantly correcting himself, while his face flushed, as he saw Merle smile, he continued in Spanish:

"Do you mean to restore my winnings to these men here?"

"Yes."

"It will take half I have."

"I just won all you had; you are a beggar."

"I will bleed to death in the meantime."

"No; but if you do you will be no loss. Now you, senor?" and Merle motioned to another loser, in his playing with the Monte Prince.

The sum won from him was counted out, and thus it went on until all present had received back their losses.

Then Merle took up his anchor and necklace, replaced the ring on his finger, and put his winnings in his pocket.

"Now go!"

Quickly he drew the keen blade from the trembling hand on the table, and pointed toward the door.

With a malediction upon his white lips, and a deadly glare in his eyes, the Monte Prince arose from the table and left the hall.

"Watch him, senor; he means you mischief," cried a dozen voices.

"I do not fear him, senores. Now I am at the service of Major Vistal Guarena," and Merle glanced over the room.

But the Mexican officer was nowhere visible; he had gone out just before the Monte Prince.

With a bow to those assembled Merle left the hall, and was soon in his rooms at the hotel.

With a strange look upon his face, he began to pace to and fro, evidently inwardly excited though outwardly calm.

After a while his thoughts found vent in words, low and earnest:

"How strange that I should have crossed his path; and stranger, that I should have remembered his face."

"Had I not met him, I never should have recalled that fearful night from the past, for it seemed buried, not even to be exhumed when I read my poor father's letter."

"I was but six years old then, yet I am confident he knew me, as I did him; I saw that he remembered me when I staked the anchor and necklace."

"Thanks to my wonderful expertness at cards, I was enabled to revenge myself upon him, and show him to all as a cheat, while he will bear my mark to his grave."

"Were it other than his money I would not take it, for I have as much gold as I care for—and that Mexican officer is either in league with him, or is in his power from some cause. Come in!" he called out, as a knock came at the door of his room.

A man entered that was a stranger—a man of gentlemanly address clad in undress uniform.

"Pardon, senor; the Senor Don Merlino, I believe?"

"I am, senor; how can I serve you?"

"I come from my friend, Major Vistal Guarena."

"Ah! a challenge, I presume?"

"Yes, senor; he begs that you meet him for the insult cast in his teeth."

"With pleasure, senor; I caught Major Guarena in evil company, and was not very choice in my language. When does he desire the meeting?"

"If you would suggest your friend—"

"I have no friend in Vera Cruz whom I would ask to act for me. I will come alone."

"Ah?" and the Mexican raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"I hope it will not inconvenience you, senor, to postpone the meeting for two weeks. The major is called at once to the capital and will be absent that length of time."

"Very well, I am myself going away to-morrow, but I will return as soon as possible, and will let the Major Guarena know of my arrival. Adios, senor."

The Mexican left the room muttering:

"A mere boy, yet one who knows what he is about, judging by what Vistal told me of him."

"My advice, my dear friend Guarena, will be to let him alone, or he may serve you worse than he did the Monte Prince."

So saying, the Mexican betook himself to his quarters, while Merle threw himself upon his bed, and slept until Boots came to awaken him, and say that the New Orleans packet would sail within the hour.

When it did sail Merle was a passenger on board.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MONTE PRINCE.

WHEN the Monte Prince left the gambling-hall he was joined outside the door by Vistal Guarena, and the two walked rapidly along to-

gether until they came to the quarters of the Senor Cosala.

"Pedro, you imp of Satan, run and fetch me a surgeon—that American doctor who has settled here," cried Don Felipe, savagely, as he entered his luxurious quarters; and he gave the Mexican servant a slap in the face with his bleeding hand.

Pedro uttered a yell of terror, for he had just been awakened from a sound sleep, in which he had been having a bad dream—not that he was afraid of a little blood; oh, no, he had often seen blood on the Monte Prince before, but it was from the veins of other people; the gambler was considered invulnerable, and a number had fallen before his deadly aim and cool hand.

"I am the imp of Satan for I serve you, Don Felipe!" said Pedro, as he bounded away; but it was in a voice his master did not hear.

While awaiting the coming of Dr. Henry Rathbun, formerly a surgeon in the United States navy, and who had settled in Vera Cruz, neither Don Felipe nor Major Guarena spoke a word. The former paced the floor with angry strides, holding the wrist of his wounded hand in a vise-like grasp; the latter threw himself into an easy-chair.

They had not long to wait, for Pedro returned, accompanied by a man whose appearance at once denoted his American origin. There was nothing striking about him—a plain-looking man who had taken a fancy to live in Vera Cruz.

"Well, senor, who have you for my services now?" he asked, pleasantly.

"Myself," and the Monte Prince smiled grimly.

"You? Why, I thought you were like Achilles, invulnerable?"

"Like Achilles I have a vulnerable spot, yet it is not my heel, but my hand," and he held forth the wounded member.

"By Esculapius! this was a bad drive; had it been at your heart it would have gone clean through."

"It went clean through my hand, as you see, and two inches into the wooden table; the man that drove it had an iron arm."

"True; but I can soon fix you up; you will have to keep quiet for a while—wear your arm in a sling, and it will give you an interesting look, as you have lost a great deal of blood. There, now, how does that feel?" and Dr. Rathbun completed his work.

"Curse the pain; I don't mind that; it is the being beaten at one's own game. I caught a Tartar, captain."

"I expected you would; luck will change, and I have felt that the sword of Damocles was hanging over you, Don Felipe, upheld by a single hair. Who was the man who did it?"

"A *ranchero* from Corpus Christi, he calls himself."

"Ah! they're a bad lot up there. When will he be buried?"

"He is not dead."

"Not dead! you astonish me, senor; a man wound you that way and still alive?" and the doctor elevated his voice and eyebrows together.

"Yes, he won all my money, caught me fingering a secret pack of cards, pinned my hand down to the table, and told me to go! Strange, wasn't it?"

"Marvelous; but now I must go; will drop in after breakfast to see you again," and the doctor departed, passing another person at the door just coming in.

"Well, senores, you sent for me, I believe?" he said, gayly.

"Yes, Juarez, I wanted you. I wish you to carry a challenge for me," said Major Guarena, addressing the new comer, who was Real Juarez, a Lieutenant of Cavalry, and the boon companion of his brother officer and the Monte Prince.

"Assuredly; and to whom?"

"To Don Leon Merlino, a *ranchero* from Corpus Christi, and at the Plaza Hotel."

"Hold on! Don't be in too great a hurry, for my hand will be in a bad way for some days. Tell him, Real, that Major Guarena has to go at once to the city of Mexico on official business; will return in about two weeks, and will then meet him for his insulting language," said the Monte Prince.

"Si senores; what weapons?" asked Real Juarez, in the same gay tones he had first used.

"Not knives, certainly. You are a dead-shot, Guarena?"

"Yes, and if I mistake not his eye, he, too, is one who never fails."

"You excel as a swordsman?"

"Yes."

"Then Juarez must work round to get those weapons, although he will of course have the choice. Get what time you can, and say the place will be appointed when the major returns, and drop in in the morning, Juarez, and let us know the result—say about twelve o'clock; the major will remain with me to-night."

The Monte Prince seemed to govern the whole affair; his influence over his companions was certainly great, and the young lieutenant dashed off a goblet of *aguardiente* and went on his mission, as the reader has seen.

For some moments after his departure no

word was spoken, and then Don Felipe said gruffly:

"To bed with you, Pedro!"

The Mexican quietly obeyed, and, as he left, Vistal Guarena burst into a rude laugh.

"In the Fiend's name, what ails you?" and the Monte Prince turned savagely upon him.

"I was laughing at you, and myself, too."

"I confess I do not see the joke."

"It is very plain—the stool-pigeon and the huntsman both caught."

"Meaning you for the stool-pigeon, and me for the huntsman?" sneered the gambler.

"Of course! I cultivated the pleasant stranger at your suggestion, led him into the net, and both of us caught a Tartar—you are cursing now inwardly, and gritting your teeth in pain, and I am dreading a funeral, with myself in the leading vehicle, for that man will kill me if I ever meet him."

"Of course he will; swordsman and shot that I am, I would not dare face him; he has the nerve of his father."

"His father?"

"Yes, his father."

"What know you of his father?"

"Much; he is the son of Freelance, the Buccaneer."

"Impossible!"

"No more impossible than your being my son," sneered the Monte Prince.

"Hush! not so loud, please, for I am not proud of the relationship," said the major, in husky tones.

"No more am I; but what you are, boy, you owe to me."

"My being a villain, granted."

"Bah! all men are villains, if you only find them out; the creed of this world is that there is not so much harm in doing wrong, as being caught at it."

"So it seems; you were caught at it were you not?"

"Have a care, Vistal Guarena, and don't anger me; blood is thicker than water, yet it flows easily," threateningly said the Monte Prince.

"So I observed, to-night. I really thought you had no blood in you, but I see I was mistaken, and it is red, too, like a Christian's."

The Monte Prince made a step toward him, his hand in his bosom on a knife-hilt; but he stopped with a smile on his face.

"Bah! I am a fool to get angry with you; you are useful to me."

"True, I have been made so from the fear that the world might know you were my father!"

"This is useless talk."

"So I perceive; tell me about the son and heir of that other great man, Freelance, the Buccaneer; I never before suspected you knew him."

"Yes, I served upon his vessel for years under him; hast heard of Red Manuel, Freelance's lieutenant?"

"Yes; I have heard he was such a devil that even Freelance sentenced him to be hung at the yard-arm for his cruelties."

"You have heard aright, boy; he had a passion for shedding blood, and he hasn't yet gotten over it. I am Red Manuel."

"You! Santissima Maria! You lie!"

The Monte Prince smiled pleasantly, and turning to the table dashed a glass of fiery liquor down his throat.

"No, I tell the truth."

"Hush! Pedro may hear you."

Don Felipe quickly crossed the room, opened a door and strode into another apartment. There lay Pedro fast asleep; he had curiosity, as has every servant, but he had discretion with it, and preferred sleep to eavesdropping, where Don Felipe was his master.

"How slender a thread life hangs on, my son. Had Pedro been there listening, he would now be dead," and a devilish gleam was in the speaker's eyes.

Major Guarena shuddered in spite of himself, and said, slowly:

"Did you tell me the truth, padre mine?"

"I did; my name was Manuel Guarena, as you know; when I went to buccaneering I left the latter name to you, and became, as soon as I distinguished myself, Red Manuel. It was only to please you, my son, that I became Don Felipe Cosala."

"I knew you to be a gambler, one who had neither honor nor mercy, and that the mysterious death of a traveler, who had stopped at our home, had caused you to leave the country; it was even whispered that you had taken with you the dead man's gold, yet I never believed you so vile as to be Red Manuel."

"No slurs, boy; if I had not left that little home in Florida, you would not now be the Mexican, Major Vistal Guarena. No, you would now be a poor farmer, and perhaps married to some tow-headed country girl."

"But my—departure we will call it, for flight does not sound dignified—my departure from home brought success with it, and in your tenth year I was enabled to bring you to Mexico, to be reared in a respectable family, and my secret influence made you an officer in the Mexican army, where you hold great power as the adjutant of that stone pile of misery, the Castle San

Juan de Uloa, and are engaged to marry the rich daughter of the commandant, to in turn become commandant yourself. Just see what I have done for you, ungrateful boy that you are."

"The best thing you ever have done for me is in hiding from the world our kindred to each other; for that I thank you."

"It would not be policy to do otherwise, boy. You are useful to me now, as a stranger; I give you money to play against me and *lose*, and your ill-luck tempts others, whom you drag in to the sacrifice; for your services I pay you more than double your pay as an officer, not to speak of little loans."

"Yes, and keep an account of every *peso*, to make me pay you back when I marry Victorine Ruidrez."

"Your borrowed money only, boy; not your salary."

"Which is, or will be, a considerable sum."

"Yes; marry sooner, and borrow less frequently."

"I will have to, now that you are a beggar," sneered the son.

"And you are a liar," pleasantly retorted the father. "In that chest I have fifty thousand *pesos*, and the *match to the ring that Merle Freelance wore to-night*," and a smile unfathomable crossed the cold face of the Monte Prince, while Major Vistal Guarena gazed upon him as though he believed him Satan in the disguise of a man.

CHAPTER XXX.

A STORY OF CRIME.

"THAT stone seemed priceless; a finer one I never saw; and you have its mate?" said Vistal Guarena, after a pause of a moment in the conversation.

"Yes, I have its mate," and crossing the room he unlocked, by the use of several keys, the iron chest, and took therefrom a band of massive gold in which was set a single superb diamond.

"Yes, it is exactly alike; it would make a splendid bridal gift for the fair Victorine," said Vistal, avariciously.

"Do as I tell you in one thing and I will give it to you."

"It's a bargain; if it's not blood-letting."

"No; your dainty fingers need not be soiled, and your conscience must become like mine."

"God pity me if it did! It is sufficiently elastic now; but, are you not going to retire?"

"And leave my guest awake?"

"I will throw myself here on this sofa divan."

"Bah! you could not sleep; you are too nervous, but I can drop off into a slumber that a nursing babe would envy. Steel your muscles, your nerves, and your brain to your own *will*, my son."

"You certainly possess wonderful control over yourself."

"It is an art, acquired after long study. See, this wounded hand is as steady as a rock," and he took it from the silken sling and held it out.

"I see; it has gotten over its trembling," said the son, dryly.

"I admit it; I met more than my match to-night, though he is but a boy. Then I was nervous at future prospects, for joy unnerves, you know, at times."

"Satan knows what you had to rejoice at; I don't."

"That will come out in our compact when you strive for the ring."

"Where did you get that ring?"

"Took it from a woman's finger."

"Without her consent, of course?"

"Yes, she was unconscious; shall I tell you the story?"

"Oh yes, let me hear all that is horrible about you."

The eyes of the Monte Prince glittered like a snake's, and lighting a cigar he said, quietly:

"It was when I was with Freelance; we were attacked by a brig, one dark night, and it proved to be a Spanish vessel-of-war, and as we boarded, or rather two-thirds of the crew, for with the balance was left on our own decks; I say as the men, led by Freelance, boarded the brig forward, the Spaniards boarded the schooner aft, and the very Satan was to pay at once."

"Freelance had his wife on board with him, wife and her maid, and they were in the cabin, whither several Spaniards made their way, and I followed them at once, leaving my men to beat back those on deck."

"I found the Princess—Freelance had married a Persian princess, you know—"

"No, I don't know—had he?"

"Yes, and I found her unconscious with fright, as was her maid also, and the two Spaniards in possession of the cabin."

"I shot one of them in the back, and cut the other down with my cutlass, ere they were aware of my presence—"

"Yes you like to strike in the back I believe," said the son, with biting sarcasm.

"As you may one day find out, when you cease to be longer useful to me."

"I pray Heaven I may ever be most useful; but I retard this very interesting romance—if I only knew a novelist, I would give him the points to work up into a story. Proceed, *padre mine*."

"As the second Spaniard fell I saw upon the finger of the princess this ring, and I immediately drew it off, knowing it would be laid to the charge of the enemy."

"The ruby anchor you saw last night, and the diamond necklace, Zulah (that was her name) also wore, and I strove to take those, too—they are worth a million, boy."

"The more fool you, as a thief, for not taking them."

"I tried to; but the setting was too strong and massive to break easily, and the fastening I did not know; but I would have broken them loose had I not heard rushing feet on deck, and the voice of Freelance."

"Oh! you feared him, then?"

"I did; I ran from the cabin, found the Spaniards had driven our crew from their deck, and once on his schooner again, Freelance was driving the enemy back to their brig, and of course I joined in the fight—"

"Like a cur running after another cur, when somebody has first set him to going."

"I killed the two Spaniards in the cabin."

"Yes; the Christian, the Turk, even the Jew, will fight for his God—you fought for yours—*Booty*," suggested Vistal Guarena, in tones most cutting; but the swarthy face of his father never changed, and he continued:

"I told Freelance that I had rushed into the cabin, single-handed against a half-dozen, and killing two, had put the rest to flight, and he made me his first officer, in the place of the one that had been killed, for I was a boatswain then, having been with him but a short while."

"And Freelance took his wife buccaneering with him?"

"Oh, no; he was not then a buccaneer; only cruising in his own vessel for pleasure."

"He had been in Eastern waters, but coming this side the Atlantic, I joined him at Boston, whither I went after leaving home, on the occasion you refer to."

"Of course the ring was missed; but it was laid to the Spanish seamen, and I kept it hidden."

"Shortly after the affair with the Spanish brig we touched at Charleston in the Carolinas, and Freelance sent me ashore to purchase stores; but he sailed shortly after, leaving word for me to join him at Vera Cruz. It was said he recognized some one on board of an American vessel of war at anchor near him, that caused him to put at once to sea."

"I think I was lucky in being left, as Freelance was wrecked on the Mexican coast somewhere, and his wife lost, I believe, leaving him and three others alive. You see the devil takes care of his own."

"True, you have lived quite long—let me see, nearly fifty now, though you don't look it."

Without noticing the remark, the Monte Prince continued:

"Those three were a baby boy, his wife's maid, and a man who was the boon companion of Freelance. He held no rank on the schooner, only the position of friend to the captain."

"A pleasant berth, with a pleasant captain."

"Yes, and this man seemed to enjoy it. Well, I met Freelance in Vera Cruz, as ordered, and went with him into the Mexican service."

"You know what side we took, and that he was outlawed by a *pronunciamento* as a pirate—and thus he became a buccaneer, I still following his fortunes."

"You doubtless followed them as long as you could?"

"I did; but he seemed to think John Manuel too cruel. The crew had an unpleasant way of bestowing nick-names, and they dropped the John, which served as an honest prefix to my cognomen, and called me Red Manuel."

"On account of little indiscretions on your part, such as cutting a throat, thrusting a knife in the back, and—"

"Just so, on account of little peculiarities of that kind they rechristened me; but Freelance, not content with breaking me of my rank, one day, because I shot an ugly old hag, whom we had captured on a prize, and whom I recognized—"

"Ah! an old friend?"

"Yes, one who looked as though she might have been the devil's dam; she was your mother, you know?"

"My mother?"

The face of Vistal Guarena turned livid and he sprang to his feet.

"Sit down! Keep cool, for the thermometer is up among the nineties, and you might get moon-struck, my son."

The tone was metallic in its coldness, and the face unchanged.

One glance into that face and the young officer resumed his seat, a sigh escaping his lips.

"Yes, she was my wife and your mother, once a beautiful young girl, an Italian, who danced for a living on the theater boards."

"I became infatuated with her, and she married me, and we settled down to wedded misery upon the little Florida farm my parents had left me to starve on."

"I thought my mother died when I was a child—you always told me so," said Vistal, slowly.

"I always told you a lie, dear boy; your mother ran away from home with a circus com-

pany, and I let her go, for we were not like turtle-doves in our married life."

"It was she who taught me how great were my powers for devilment, and I set to work exhibiting my talents upon that stranger who stopped at my house for shelter one night."

"That was my master-stroke, for it made a man of me, and of you too, for I brought you here where you could develop your talents; for 'like father, like son' I thought."

"Now, what became of my stray wife after she left my bed and board I cannot tell you, for I silenced her tongue ere I learned her story, which doubtless would have been of interest; but, certain it is, a dried-up specimen of female anatomy, I found her upon a prize we captured, and her tongue began to let loose a stream of abuse upon me."

"To stop the flow of language, I shot her through the brain."

"It was an unlucky shot for me, I then thought—but *now* I think differently—for Freelance saw the act and ordered me hung at the yard-arm within the hour."

"It was dark when I was led forth to execution, and I saw an advantage in my favor, if I could use it. We were bowling merrily along within half a league of the land, and the wind was blowing seven knots, and the schooner making nine out of it."

"The man who was to tie my hempen cravat about my neck I had once favored slightly, by saving his life, and I whispered to him to place a knife up my right sleeve, and not to bind my hands, though seeming so to do."

"Up I went to the yard-arm, hanging clear of the schooner and over the waters, and though choked savagely I freed my hands, severed the rope above my head and went down feet first into the sea."

"It was believed the rope broke, the darkness hiding my act; I was expected to drown immediately, and the schooner passed on."

"I struck out for the shore as soon as I loosened my hempen cravat, and I need not tell you that I arrived, for the presence of your affectionate father here proves that much."

"Now, being averse to yard-arms I came to Mexico to carve out my fortune, going to the Capital, and entering into business there."

"What business?"

"Gambling."

"Proceed; I am all attention."

"I had with me all I possessed in the world, for I would not leave behind me for others that which was of use to me; so I had some funds, and my diamond ring, besides a number of very fair precious stones, that I turned into money."

"After I had laid the corner-stone of my fortune I felt a longing to see you, my son, so I had you brought hither, concocted a story about your being the son of a wealthy Cuban who had died of yellow fever in Tampico, and left you to my guardianship, with some little money, and had no difficulty in getting you adopted by that old fool Inglicia, who died and left you a fair fortune, which you have run through with."

"And did you dare go to the city of Mexico after having served with Freelance?"

"It seems so; I wore short-cropped hair then, and a very long beard; now I wear very long hair and no beard, only this," and the Monte Prince quietly fondled the ends of his black, silken mustache.

"But about that Don Merlino? You have not told me how you knew him, and how you recognized him?"

"Ah! my son is interested, I see, in the story of his father."

"I have not seen that dangerous young man since he was five or six years of age, yet I recognized him to-night, for, excepting having grown older, his face has not changed."

"With even this thrust through my hand, and my one hundred and fifty thousand hard-earned savings gone, I rejoice that I met him."

"Why?"

"I will tell you why," and a look so very devilish crossed the man's face, that Vistal Guarena felt assured that he was to hear another story of crime from his father's lips.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MONTE PRINCE SEEKS REVENGE.

A few indolent whiffs at his cigar did the Monte Prince give after his promise to tell Vistal Guarena why he rejoiced at having met Merle; then he began, in a voice as calm as though telling an ordinary story:

"As I told you, Vistal, the son of Freelance the Buccaneer, was the man, or rather youth, for he is nothing more in years, who drove that anchor-bilted knife through my hand to-night, and which leaves me a debt to settle with him, for my revenge against his father I *thought* I had enjoyed; I am not, however, so easy in my mind on that point just now, as you will see by my story."

"When Freelance was outlawed as a buccaneer by the Mexican government, he left here in Vera Cruz his baby boy."

"The child was placed at the home of an old Mexican woman, whom the chief had in some way served in the bygone, and the maid of the

boy's mother, also a Persian, had immediate charge of him.

"When my trouble occurred with Freelance, the boy was over four years old, and of course I looked upon him as the object of my revenge upon his father, who was crazily attached to the little Merle, for such was his name."

"Father's do love their sons, then?" sneered Vistal Guarena.

"That depends, my dear boy, upon the son; but do not interrupt me with your facetious remarks, if you wish to hear my pleasant story."

"I'll try not to offend again; I am all attention."

"To gain my end, I visited as soon as I gained power in the land, the home of the Mexican woman, and unrecognized by the Persian maid, for my disguise was complete—"

"How did you disguise the villainy in your face? That feature of Red Manuel must still have lingered on the virtuous physiognomy of Don Felipe Cosala."

"There you are again; but never mind, I will not quarrel with you."

"My disguise was complete, and I made love to the maid, or rather nurse, for she was a beauty, and I cultivated the boy, who grew very fond of me."

"Ah!"

"Yes, it is a fact, for I did all I could to win the little fellow over, and I was successful."

"All my plans working, I was called by business to Tampico, and suddenly came upon the boon friend of Freelance, and intuition told me he had come to take the boy from Vera Cruz—perhaps carry him to his father."

"I saw this man land from a pilot-boat, and as soon as he had walked away I loosened the tongues of the crew and learned that they had been brought to, a few leagues out, by a schooner, and paid liberally to bring him to Tampico."

"Close questioning proved to me that my surmise was correct, for the men remembered having heard some one on board the schooner call out:

"If the weather is bad, I will be at the rendezvous the first pleasant day; let nothing prevent you from getting the boy."

"I tracked the man to a tavern and found that he had made inquiries as to when the first vessel sailed for Vera Cruz."

"This decided me; I chartered a small craft and left within the hour."

"Arriving in the city, I went to find the boy at once; but he was out with his nurse, and I awaited their arrival, to find that some fool I had won money from had believed I intended marrying the Persian girl, and had, to thwart me, told her I was a gambler and a murderer, for he was pleased to call some little affairs of honor I had indulged in by the harsh name of murders."

"Strange; he should have known better than to make such an accusation against you."

"So I told him five minutes before I killed him."

"You killed him, then?"

"Of course; what else could I do, for he kept the child from going willingly with me, and compelled me to take him by force."

"And the authorities?"

"Why, Vistal, you surprise me. I went by night and alone, and one of the guards in the street went blind, that is, he could not see beyond a certain handful of pesos he had, and the other guard, not very far away, was afflicted with deafness from the same cause—gold."

"You were lavish with your money."

"I love gold much, my boy; but I love revenge more."

"Well, I went by night to the little house, and to my surprise the two women evidently suspected that my intentions were wicked, for they would not open the door to me."

"Why did you not try gold?"

"I tried something more effective in that case—lead."

"Ah!"

The manner in which Vistal Guarena uttered this exclamation every now and then, was insulting in the extreme, but the Monte Prince would always answer it with a bow, serene, polite and smiling.

"Yes, I shot the lock off the door and entered, to find that the damage was not alone to the door—I had shot the Mexican woman through the body."

"Killing her, of course?"

"No; wounding her then, but killing her with my knife, as she was inconsiderate enough to scream for help."

"She should have had more consideration, that is a fact."

"So I thought, and I was offended at her action, and stopped the racket with my knife."

"And the Persian nurse, and child?"

"The boy was in another room, but the nurse was present, for she came at me with a long knife in her hand."

"You felt hurt at this conduct, on her part, as a matter of course?"

"I did, for I don't like a knife in a woman's hand; would rather fight two men armed with long blades, than one woman with a dirk; you don't know where they are going to strike."

"True, they are like the lightning in that re-

spect. Well, where did this pleasant Persian strike?"

"She struck the floor, driving the knife in the plank, for I shot her before she got to me."

"Gold for the patrols—lead for the women; proceed, my father."

"I then went after the boy, who had seen all that had occurred and had retreated to the furthest corner of the next room, for the door was open; but, would you believe it? the child showed fight, and was armed with a toy hatchet with which he attacked me, and I was forced to strike him a violent blow to prevent his doing me injury."

"The blow stunned him, and I bore him away to a place of safety, where I left him."

"Upon returning to my hotel I came full upon the messenger sent by Freelance, and I at once followed him, determined to take advantage of circumstances."

"Poor circumstances."

"Good that, very, my witty son; you have your mother's wit; you inherited her tongue, upon my word; but I am not fond of tongue, that is—too much of it."

"Well, I followed him to the house and saw him enter. All was darkness within, for I had dashed out the light, and he called aloud to arouse the inmates."

"I answered outside, and as he came toward me I knocked him down and sprung upon him."

"Then I called loudly for help, but it was a long time before it came, for that deaf patrol could not hear, nor the blind one see what was going on."

"But, help did come at last and I marched my prisoner off, accused him of murdering two women, and having a confederate who ran off with a child."

"Of course he denied it; but he was in the hands of the military authorities, who knew me, and while I was complimented, he was marched off to the castle as a life-long prisoner."

"Is he in the De Uloa, now?"

"Yes."

"His name?"

"He has none—only his number."

"His number, then?"

"Five hundred."

"Yes; he is incarcerated for murder—was never tried—sentenced for life—a man of sixty, now—large, blue eyes, long hair and beard—eight, five feet eleven inches."

"He is in the second tier of cells, and is in perpetual darkness there; the jailer reports that he will not live long."

"My dear boy, you know him by heart; are you thus well posted on all the prisoners in the castle?"

"By no means; I inspect once a year, and this man's face struck me when I first saw it, three years ago, when appointed to the castle, and I felt that he had done no wrong."

"The colonel commandant then thought differently."

"Upon your say so?"

"Yes."

"Let me see—Colonel Ruidrez succeeded General Corrientes, I understand—you held some power over Corrientes and he did as you asked."

"I held the same power over him that I do over others high in authority."

"And that is—"

"That of debtor; most great men gamble, you know, Vistal?"

"Very true; but Colonel Ruidrez does not; he is rich and can do an act of justice."

"Such as—?"

"Release No. 500."

"No, for he believes him guilty."

"But I will—"

"You dare say one word in favor of that man, and—"

"Enough; I am in your power; you made me what I am—a forger, and a decoy of men for you to rob; I am in your power, Don Felipe Cosala, the Monte Prince."

"I know it, for I hold your forgery on the Bank; you know I took it up the better to keep you in the traces."

"That was hardly needed; rather than be known as your son, I would commit almost any crime," bitterly said the young man.

"Now you are talking with reason, and No. 500 must rot in his dungeon; he deserves it for one thing."

"What is that?"

"He knows of a treasure greater than any monarch possesses."

"A treasure?"

"How dull you are; take a glass of liquor to quicken your understanding—here," and the Monte Prince poured out a goblet of fiery spirits and handed it to the young man, who dashed it off at a draught, for his nerves were unsteady after what he had heard.

Don Felipe quietly refilled the silver goblet and drank down the contents.

"Now we can run on smoothly; I say No. 500 knows where the treasure of Freelance is concealed."

"He was wrecked with the Buccaneer, but the immense treasure was saved; this I got from the Persian girl."

"But where the immense booty is hidden No.

500 will not tell, although I have offered him his pardon if he would do so."

"And he refuses?"

"Yes; he swears he will die with the secret unknown to others."

"Three years ago I saw him last and told him of the death of Freelance, for I proved to him I knew who he was, though he failed to recognize me; but the stubborn idiot refused to say a word about it, and this is his revenge on me."

"Then the secret will not be found out, and all this treasure will be lost?" cried Vistal Guarena, with avaricious disappointment.

"No, there is one more chance of finding out."

"How?"

"Through the son of the buccaneer, for I am confident that Merlino the *ranchero*, knows where lies the treasure."

"But he will keep the secret to himself—and the treasure, too."

"That we shall see."

CHAPTER XXXII.

DON FELIPE'S PLOT.

"THE man who punished you last night, I fear will never be forced to tell what you wish him to," said Major Guarena, in answer to the last remark of his father.

"We shall see if he will."

"And you are certain that he is the son of Freelance, for, though you kidnapped him when a boy, I judge you have lost sight of him for some years?" inquiringly said the officer, whose greed for gain now conquered the good in his composition, for he was not bad at heart, when compared with the older villain, his father.

"Oh, I am certain enough about his being the son of the buccaneer; he is not only the image of his father, but is strangely like his mother; to do him justice, he is a wonderfully handsome fellow, in both face and form."

"Yes, I did lose sight of him; but see, the sun is rising, and we have made a pleasant night of it."

"As I was saying, when that ray of sunlight interrupted me, I lost sight of the boy."

"I left him at an old Mexican's on the coast, below here a few leagues, and regularly received word of the boy for several months, and then hearing nothing from my man I ran down to see what was the matter."

"The Mexican hut was in ruins, and I was told by some people living back in the country that the buccaneers had landed on the coast, pillaged the people, killing a few of them, and carried off the boy."

"Now, though I am not certain, I have always thought that it was Freelance, who, in some way, gained knowledge of the boy's whereabouts; but, what is most mysterious, I afterward saw the little fellow in this very harbor."

"I was, in company with a number of notabilities, coming up the harbor in a yacht, having been on a cruise of a day, and running close in toward a merchant vessel, I suddenly descried that runaway quietly looking at us from the ship's quarter-deck."

"I turned away lest he should see me, and upon arriving at town took dinner, and returned down the harbor to board the vessel; I was too late, for it had sailed an hour before."

"That gave me the idea that the boy was not with his father, but knocking about from ship to ship, homeless, friendless and a wail."

"The other day I saw him, as a man, and I thought I recognized him, and kept my eye upon him, and now I see by the papers that Merle, a former lieutenant of Freelance, the buccaneer, became an officer in the United States navy and led a mutiny; but you read the account."

"Yes, and in Don Leon Merlino, *ranchero*, from Corpus Christi, you recognize Merle, the Mutineer?"

"I do."

"There is a price on his head."

"A few thousand pesos," said the Monte Prince, contemptuously.

"Boy, I tell you he knows where the hidden treasure is, and we will drag the secret from him."

"How? I am interested to learn, I assure you."

"You sent a challenge to him to meet you in the *duello*, for calling you a coward?"

"I did."

"Well, Real Juarez was to have the meeting delayed for two weeks for you to go to the capital."

"In the Virgin's name! what shall I go there for?"

"For promotion."

"I am groping in the dark."

"I will lead you to light; you must be placed in command of the Castle San Juan de Uloa."

"I?"

"Why not?"

"Colonel Ruidrez is—"

"Curse Colonel Ruidrez; he must be promoted, too."

"I still grope."

"I still lead; you must go to the capital with letters from me to Mexico's ruler, and to others who hold the reins of Government, and there will be two promotions, for Ruidrez will be placed in command elsewhere, with higher rank,

and you, my gallant boy, will be made commandant of the Castle San Juan de Uloa."

"But, can you do this?"

"Is it worth a trip to Mexico city to find out?"

"Yes."

"Well, you start to-day, and return within the two weeks. Ruidrez will be relieved of his command and you will shoulder his epaulettes and remain at the castle."

"And the Senorita Victorine?"

"Must become the Senora Guarena before her father leaves, and remain the belle of the castle."

"Splendid! What then?"

"You must designate the place for the duel with this mutineer, and a file of soldiers will be quietly on hand to arrest him."

"Once in the castle he goes to a dungeon, if he does not make known where the treasure is, and he stays there for life."

"If he does tell, under promise of half-shares, I will kill him and give you his share."

"It shall be as you say, if you have the power to do what you profess in the way of promotions," said the delighted young officer.

"A trip to the capital will prove that; now let us freshen our appetites and sit down to breakfast, for Pedro announced it by bell, several minutes since."

The two men took a drink of liquor to their success and stepped into the breakfast-room, where both ate heartily, the Monte Prince occasionally cursing his wounded hand.

As they arose from the table Lieutenant Real Juarez entered.

"Well, senor, you saw the Don Merlino?" asked the Monte Prince, with some eagerness for him.

"Yes, and arranged for two weeks hence; it suited him, he said, as he was to leave to-day."

"Leave! he leave Vera Cruz? Where is he going?" cried the Monte Prince.

"He has gone."

"Gone!" almost shrieked both men.

"Yes, senores; he sailed in the packet for New Orleans at noon."

"This must not be. Juarez, go at once to Captain Caballos, of the armed cutter in the harbor, and tell him Don Felipe will board him within two hours to go in pursuit of the New Orleans packet, that carries off a state prisoner of the greatest importance to the Government; do you understand?"

"Si, senor!"

"Then obey as soon as possible."

The lieutenant departed in haste, and the Monte Prince turned to Major Guarena:

"I will overhaul the packet and capture him, and Caballos must hold him until you get the castle; now I will write the letters I promised, while you go and prepare for your journey; be back here within the hour."

"But what if you do not overhaul the packet?"

"Then I shall seize him in the United States and bring him back—I will not lose that treasure."

Two hours after Major Vistal Guarena was on his way, post-haste, to the city of Mexico, and the Monte Prince was on board the Mexican cutter, which, under clouds of canvas, was in pursuit of the New Orleans packet-ship.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FOILED.

THE New Orleans and Vera Cruz packet-ship, Mexico, was a rapid sailer, a staunch vessel, and possessed a good captain and able crew, requisites most necessary indeed where life is so thoroughly at stake in tempting the dangers of the mighty deep.

"Captain Ralston, that is an armed craft in your wake."

The speaker was a man above the average in height, and had the look of one who had, in earlier years, been exceedingly active and powerful; but now he was slightly stooped in the shoulders and walked with a cane upon which he pressed heavily.

Still in spite of the three-score and ten years which his white hair and gray beard proved must have passed over his head, his eyes were bright and piercing, and with the aid of a good sea-glass that he carried in his hand he had detected that a vessel three leagues in the wake of the Mexico was a cruiser.

"I believe you are right, commodore; he looks saucy even at this distance, and is coming on with a big bone in his teeth; I hope he won't prove to be one of those light-heeled free rovers that sometimes give us a chase."

"I hope not, for your half-dozen little sixes and one brass twelve would not be of much service against such an armament as those fellows carry; still, captain, if he is a buccaneer, and tries boarding, we are fortunate in having an exceedingly large passenger list, and you must number thirty in crew?"

"Thirty-three all told, with myself, commodore, and forty male passengers in the cabin and twelve in the steerage—eighty-five in all."

"Then we must let him board us, keeping our forces concealed and then not only drive him from the decks but seize his schooner."

"By St. George! commodore, your years have not taken from you a desire for a sea-fight, I

discover. If it comes to blows, sir, remember you are the commander."

"Ah, no, Captain Ralston; I will aid you all in my power, but you must fight the ship," and the old sailor turned his glass again upon the pursuing craft, for now it was evident the vessel astern was in chase of the packet-ship.

As he leveled his glass again there was visible upon the wooden case in large gilt letters, a name:

"ALFRED BRAINARD,

Commodore U. S. Navy.

"CONSTITUTION, 44 GUNS."

"Captain Ralston!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"That vessel is a schooner, low in the water, raking masts and carries half a hundred men, and fully six twelve to a broadside."

"It is either one of those Caribbean corsairs, or—"

"Or what, commodore?" asked the captain, as the other paused.

"Or that Mexican cutter we left in the harbor of Vera Cruz."

"You are right, sir; I recognize her now; I thought she had a familiar look."

"It is the *El Saltador*, the Senor Caballos commander."

"What can he be in pursuit of you for, captain?"

"Some important prisoner has doubtless escaped, and he wishes to see if he is on board me; I don't think we have any suspicious character on board, do you, commodore?"

"It is hard to tell, captain; most men are masked nowadays."

"I may be wrong in my surmise; but what else could bring the Mexican cruiser after me, and he is certainly in chase, and I have known of several packets having been overhauled to search for prisoners that have escaped."

"By Heaven! if I had a poor devil on board I would almost fight for him rather than give him up to be returned to that gloomy old castle."

"Your goodness of heart does you credit, Captain Ralston; yes, that is the *El Saltador*, for I noticed the peculiar rig of the cruiser as we passed out of the harbor."

"And he comes on in a style that does not belie his name—The Leaper; by the way, commodore, what do you think of that remarkable escape at Havana, of Merle, the Mutineer and his crew?"

"It was marvelous, sir."

"Marvelous indeed was it, commodore; and they deserve to escape for their daring."

"I see that the Spaniards dub the mutineer now, *El Saltador*."

"The Leaper is a name he certainly deserves, Captain Ralston; your Mexico is fast, but *El Saltador* is faster, and is driven on in dead earnest; will you wait until he overhauls you, or come to?"

"I'll stand on until brought-to by a shot; if I thought there was any doubt about yonder craft being *El Saltador* I would arm the crew and passengers and call them to quarters."

"There is no doubt of it, captain; I have seen the Mexican cutter several times and know it to be that craft; there comes a shot now."

As Commodore Brainard spoke a puff of white smoke burst from the bows of the Mexican, and soon after came the rushing shot, flying high over the masts of the Mexico.

"Curse him, he is making me lose an hour of this good breeze; but I must obey," muttered Captain Ralston, and the Mexico was soon lying to awaiting the pleasure of the Mexican.

Running close up, with his men at quarters, as though expecting resistance, Captain Caballos hailed, in Spanish:

"*Olo la Mexico!*"

"*Bien, Senor Mexicano!*" shouted back Captain Ralston, in no very amiable mood at losing his time.

"You have a state prisoner on board—one Don Leon Merlino, a *ranchero*, from Corpus Christi," shouted back the Mexican.

"If there is such a person on board Captain Caballos has but to come and take him," haughtily replied the American, and he added, in a low voice:

"I gave it to him that time, commodore."

"By San Diego! I will do so," was heard in the angry voice of the Mexican, and a moment after a boat put off from the side of the cutter and approached the packet-ship.

"Holy Moses! what can he want here?"

"To whom do you refer, captain?" asked the commodore.

"To that devil's limb, Don Felipe Cosala, the Monte Prince; he sits beside the captain."

"Who is this Monte Prince, captain, of whom I hear so much?" asked the commodore.

"Without answering you abruptly, commodore, he is, if not Satan himself, his first cousin; a man that comes from nobody but himself knows where."

"He is a professional gambler, and was for years, is even now," 'tis said, a secret spy for the government, spying upon the movements of every official from the highest to the lowest, and all fear him for he has wonderful power."

"He is a dead shot, a desperate hand with the knife, and has sent scores of men to their graves;

but I heard that the night before we sailed he met his match, and I see he wears his right arm in a sling."

"By Neptune!"

"What, captain?"

"I recall the name—the man whom Captain Caballos asked for was the one who bearded the Lion of the Palacio of Fortune, as the gambling hell is called."

"Indeed! have you such a person on board, captain?"

"Not to my knowledge, commodore; if so, I would hate to give him up, and confess to a curiosity to know him; but I have a large passenger list. Good-morning, Senor Capitan Caballos; and Don Felipe, how are you? Heard you had been dreadfully wounded, yet you appear well."

"Senor Americano, it seems you have run off with a state prisoner, of course unintentionally, and I must request to search your vessel," replied the Mexican officer, merely returning Captain Ralston's greeting with a slight bow, while the Monte Prince inclined his head graciously; he was too elegant ever to slight a recognition.

"If I have, senor, you will find him on my passenger list. Mr. Browne, bring the register here, please."

The purser soon returned with the book, and the Monte Prince, taking the initiative, ran his finger and eyes down the names.

"Don Leon Merlino," he said, at last.

"The name is not here—*maldito!*"

"Not here, you say, Don Felipe? Then you have had your chase for nothing?"

"Your passenger list of the cabin shows not the name; but where is your steerage list?"

"It follows it—there where your finger is."

The Monte Prince hastily glanced over the dozen names.

"Not here, either; could Juarez have been misinformed? No, I called at the hotel myself, and 'twas said he took your packet for New Orleans."

"Doubtless he runs under a disguise, captain."

"It may be, senor; I do not undress my passengers as they come on board, to see if they are what their clothes represent them to be."

"I am sorry, Captain Ralston, but I must insist upon seeing every man and woman you have on board," said Captain Caballos, after a whispered conversation with the Monte Prince.

"That is as they please, sir, not for me to say."

"And you decline to summon them on deck?"

"I do; if they come you must ask them, and if I had the power, as I have the will, to protect them, you would remain a very short while upon this deck," was the quick retort of the plucky American sailor.

"The captain is angered at losing this good breeze, senor," said the Monte Prince, smilingly; then he added:

"Who is that old gentleman, Captain Ralston?"

"One who is watching most closely how Mexican naval officers and spies conduct themselves on board an American merchant vessel."

"His name?"

"Alfred Brainard, commodore of the United States navy."

"Ah!" and the Monte Prince turned his gaze upon the old commodore, who had his glass to his eye, and was closely examining the Mexican cutter.

"ALFRED BRAINARD,

Commodore U. S. Navy,

"CONSTITUTION, 44 GUNS."

That was what the Monte Prince read on the spy glass held by the old gentleman, and he said cautiously to Captain Caballos:

"We must go slow, for that old fellow is famous, and has immense influence with his Government; suppose you ask his advice, telling him that the man is a most important prisoner, and may be disguised and under an assumed name."

"I will. Senor Capitan, will you present me and Don Felipe to the American commodore?"

"Certainly, with his permission."

Captain Ralston stepped forward and saluting politely, said:

"Commodore, as you doubtless heard, those two Mexicans wish to be presented; what is your will?"

"Bring them up, of course, captain," was the answer, in a tone that the two heard, as the old sailor shoved his glass together.

"Commodore Brainard, this is Captain Caballos, of the *Marina de Mexico*, and commander of *El Saltador*, the cutter lying astern of us."

The Mexican officer bowed low, with his hand upon his heart, and the American stiffly.

"And this is Don Felipe Cosala, better known as the Monte Prince, Commodore Brainard."

"Your name is well known to me, Commodore Brainard, as a most distinguished officer; it was your vessel, sir, that captured the noted buccaneer, Freelance," said the Monte Prince.

"It was my flag-ship, senor, the Constitution, Captain Arthur Grenville, commander; we took the schooner of the buccaneer, but Captain Freelance was already dead."

"You are kind, Commodore Brainard, to give the pirate the title of captain."

"Was his being a pirate any reason why he should not hold the rank, when he held the command?" demanded the commodore, curtly.

"No, sir, your reasoning is unanswerable," and the Monte Prince bowed as though he had nothing more to say, while he glanced at Captain Caballos, who said, with another bow, and hand on his heart:

"Commodore, my Government sent me in chase of this vessel to discover if a state prisoner came off from Vera Cruz as a passenger on board."

"The passenger lists will show, if you have his name."

"We have examined, and no such name is on the books."

"Then you are doubtless on the wrong tack."

"It may be, Senior Commodore; but may he not be in disguise?"

"Why should I know aught of the state prisoners of Mexico, Senior Caballos?" somewhat impatiently answered the old man.

"Pardon, senior, a thousand pardons for worrying you; but I do wish permission to examine the passengers."

"I have not the honor to command this vessel."

"And the Senior Ralston refuses."

"I am glad he has the nerve to do so, but if you wish it, to show that we do not desire to retard your search, I will ask the passengers to come on deck, those who are not here now, and step forward as their names are called—excepting the ladies, for they must be free from impertinent scrutiny."

"*Gracias, gracias*, Senior Commodore," said Captain Caballos, and while the request was made to the passengers, who willingly acceded, he whispered to Don Felipe:

"*Caramba!* he is as cross as my grandmother of ninety; but, what an eye he has: but we are, I fear, Don Felipe, in the wrong paw here."

"The wrong paw, senior, but the right church; I am confident Merlino is on board this vessel in disguise."

"Then you eye every one faithfully for me."

"I will," and, as the purser called the names of the passengers of the Mexico, excepting the ladies and children, each stepped forward and underwent the scrutiny of the eyes of the Monte Prince.

"*Diablo!* he is not here. If here, I have not penetrated his disguise," said the Monte Prince, savagely.

"I am sorry, indeed, for your sake," and then, raising his voice, Captain Caballos thanked the passengers for their kindness, speaking in fair English, and also begged the pardon of Captain Ralston for the delay.

Saluting the commodore the two men returned to their vessel.

"Commodore, they think they have overdone the matter, and are going to pour oil upon the troubled waters by giving you a salute."

As Captain Ralston spoke the flag of the Mexican cutter was dipped, and the guns thundered forth a salute.

"Dip the stars and stripes, mate, to the eagle and the serpent," said Captain Ralston, and a moment after the two vessels were under sail, the Mexico continuing on her interrupted course, and El Salvador rushing swiftly back toward Vera Cruz.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE ARRIVAL.

WHEN the packet ship Mexico was once more bowling swiftly along, on her way to New Orleans, the commodore approached Captain Ralston and said, quietly:

"If convenient to you, Captain Ralston, I would like to have a little talk with you privately."

"Certainly, commodore; I am only too glad. Mr. Wortley take the deck, please. Now, commodore, come into my own state-room. See, the Mexican is almost hull-down."

"Yes, both vessels are running very rapidly, and will soon drop each other; but, captain, allow me to make known to you a secret, and one which I know you will keep as sacred."

"Certainly, commodore; any confidence you place in me shall be held inviolate."

"Thank you, sir; I feel that it will be so, and your expressed wishes awhile since cause me to feel that you can sympathize with one in distress."

"Assuredly, commodore," responded Captain Ralston, in surprise.

"Captain, I am not what I seem. On your books I appear as A. Brainard, U. S. Navy, the name I gave to your purser, and the spy-glass I have bears the name of Alfred Brainard, Commodore of the United States Navy, and that led you, and others, with my apparent age, to address me as that distinguished gentleman."

"Now, allow me to tell you that business of a most important nature carried me to Vera Cruz; that I am an officer of the United States navy, but traveling *incognito*, and was registered in the city we left as Don Leon Merlino, a ranchero, from Corpus Christi."

Had a solid shot crashed through the cabin, it would not have startled Captain Ralston more.

"You! you the man that gave the Monte Prince his quietus? No, it cannot be, for he was a mere youth, I was told."

"So am I, captain, when my disguise is off—see!"

The white wig was taken from the head, the long gray beard followed, and the handsome, youthful face of Merle was revealed, painted and stained, and with eyebrows and lashes whitened to resemble old age.

"I am dismayed now, certain, with surprise," exclaimed the captain.

"You need not be. I had learned something of the secret power of the Monte Prince, and for fear I might be followed and seized, and I know what seizure by Mexicans means, I sought a disguise at a Jew's shop, and my eye fell upon this sea-glass and the name on it."

"I know Commodore Brainard well; he is about my size, and I determined to personate him as nearly as possible, and bought me an undress naval suit, which, with the spy-glass, had doubtless been stolen by some sailor, and sold to the Jew. In a short while my make-up was complete, and I boarded you just as you had your anchor apeak."

"Yes, and you fooled those devilish Mexicans delightfully. By Neptune! if they were to return, I'd fight for you before I gave you up."

"No, rather than get you into trouble I would surrender myself, come what might, now that you know me as I am. And you need not appeal to Commodore Brainard as witness in this matter of your vessel being searched."

"Nor will I; the matter shall be dropped, for, after all, they did no harm; but I will *commo-dore* you until we reach port."

"It is perhaps best. One day, my dear captain, you may know why I am thus disguised."

"Roy Ralston asks no man's business, sir, that does not concern him. I am glad to have met you, and will serve you if it falls in my power. They tell me you handled the Monte Prince splendidly; would give my maintopmast to have seen it. Now I must go on deck, but I'll see you at dinner, commodore," and Captain Ralston left the cabin, confident that, if not a commodore, he had a man of much importance as passenger, for he had been told of the princely necklace and ruby anchor which had been staked on a game of cards.

In spite of her delay, the fleet Mexico made a rapid run, and dropped her anchor in the muddy Mississippi, in front of the Crescent City, just after dark, one pleasant evening.

Bidding Captain Ralston adieu, Merle, still in his disguise of an old man, went ashore and sprang into a cabriolet in waiting for a fare.

"Where, monsieur?" asked the coachman.

"To the *Cabaret d' Orleans*," said Merle, in perfect French, for, in drifting about from ship to ship as a lad, he had learned to speak several languages as though they were his mother tongue. On German, French, Spanish and English vessels had he served as cabin-boy or before the mast, after being taken from the Mexican's hut where Don Felipe had left him.

"It was 'The Carnival' time in New Orleans, and the *trottoirs* were thronged with merry citizens enjoying life, as they well know how to do, in that Southern city."

Arriving at the *Cabaret d' Orleans*, Merle secured pleasant quarters, and after a hasty meal he secured another *cabriolet* and drove along the Rue San Louis until the coachman drew rein in front of one of those elegant old edifices of foreign construction, inhabited by the old and wealthy families of the city.

Approaching the *portale* he rung at the door, and it was soon opened by a negro, with a pompous air and in livery.

"Is the Mademoiselle Monteith in the city?" asked Merle.

"Yes, massa, and in de house, too, but she ain't wisibul jist now sah, 'kase she's goin' wid her fren's to de mass ball."

"Then I could not see her, I suppose?"

"Tain't possible, ole massa; wish 'twas."

Merle slipped a twenty-five-franc piece into the hand of the negro, and asked:

"What friends accompany her to the mask ball?"

"Her guesterces, massa; dem as is visitin' de missy" and the money was quickly deposited in the capacious pocket that yawned to receive it.

"Their names, please, my man?"

"Yas, massa, dere's de capt'in an' his wife—I means Capt'in Grenville an' Missy Stelle, an' de oder capt'in, Massa Sebastin, what arove ob late from de Injies, whar de bery debil am bin to pay."

"And they all go to the *Salon Sainte Louis* to-night?"

"Yes, massa."

"Look here, my ebony friend: do you know what that is?" and Merle placed a piece of gold in the negro's palm.

"It aro a twenty-five-franc piece, massa; I gits 'em changed offen for Missy Mildred."

"Well, do as I ask you, and I will give you four more just like that one."

The eyes of the negro enlarged; to him it was a fortune; but what was to be the service rendered?

"What massa want me to do for him?" he asked, warily.

"Let me know what will be the costumes worn by Miss Monteith and her three friends at the *bal masque* to-night."

"I let massa know when dey comes down in de parlor to git in de carriage, sah."

"It will be too late then—find out now."

"How I goin' to find out, massa?"

"Miss Monteith has a maid?"

"Yes, massa—Louise."

"Here, give her these—there are ten of them, and tell her to find some excuse to come here for a moment, and I will give her as many more; tell her she must know the costumes which both ladies and gentlemen are to wear to-night."

"Upon your return, if you serve me faithfully, I will double the amount I promised you."

"Come right in here, massa," and the negro led the way through the portal into a court that opened upon a beautiful garden.

"Wait there, massa," and he motioned Merle to a seat in a small arbor.

"Golly! dat am a prince! Why, dis nigger will hab as much money as Missy Mildred got, ef dat emperor want ter know much more," and he disappeared within the mansion.

So long did he remain absent that Merle began to feel impatient at his delay; but at length he came from the mansion, accompanied by a trim little figure with a dark olive face that the young man recognized as Louise, the quadroom maid of Mildred.

"Heah am de pusson, massa, as kin gib you all de informashun you desire on de subject dat we was discussing," said the factotum, with an air of dignity that seemed to say to Louise:

"You kin take a bribe, gal, but I is beyond it."

"My good girl, I sent after you to request of you a favor."

"Is it to betray my young mistress?" asked Louise, calmly.

"Not to betray her, but the costume which she and her friends will wear to-night to the masquerade ball."

"Why do you wish to know, sir?"

"For a reason I cannot explain; but upon my honor, I mean no harm."

Louise hesitated and looked at the butler.

"I will pay most liberally for my information—here," and Merle held out both hands, one dropping gold into the palm of Louise, the other into the eager clutch of the butler, who muttered:

"Dis man am a king."

Louise said, slowly:

"I will tell you, sir, for I do not believe harm can come of it. Let me whisper to you, sir."

Merle leant forward and the pretty quadroom gave him the information desired, and thanking her he left the court, the butler ushered him out with many a bow, and then going back to the arbor to see if some stray gold piece had not been dropped during a display of such princely generosity.

As Louise returned to complete the toilet of her mistress, she muttered:

"He looked like an old man; but his voice sounded familiar, and I think it is one of Miss Mildred's beaux, wishing to know how to find her at the ball; anyhow, I hope so."

"Well, he gave me gold enough to ease my conscience, even if I had done a great wrong."

Upon leaving the Monteith mansion, Merle drove to a *costumer's*, and secured a suitable attire for the evening, ordering it sent to the *Cabaret d' Orleans*.

Dismissing his *cabriolet* near the palace-like structure of the *Sainte Louis*, now brilliantly lighted for the coming masquerade, Merle walked on until near the entrance he came upon a *gendarme*, idly smoking a *cigarre papel*.

"*Bon soir, monsieur gendarme*," he said, politely.

"Good-evening, monsieur," returned the guard, dashing aside his cigarette, for he felt that he addressed a gentleman.

"The *masques* have not yet begun to assemble, I believe?"

"No, monsieur, not for the *grande masquerade*; but we have around us to-night masks and maskers innumerable," said the *gendarme*, pleasantly. "We *gendarmes* alone appear in *real* character to-night," he added, with a smile.

Merle glanced at the crowded thoroughfares, where monks, devils, nuns, angels, white and gray, buccaneers, bandits, and innumerable other maskers were making the evening merry with laughter, song and joke—many of them poor people from the French *quartier* starving themselves six months of the year to have a gay time at *carnival*.

"When are you off duty, monsieur?"

"At eight, monsieur, and glad enough will I be, that I may join in the festivities."

"It is nearly eight now; you will need money for your pleasure; here is an eagle for you."

"Monsieur has some object in this?" said the surprised soldier.

"I have; I wish a ticket into the *Salon Sainte Louis* to-night."

"It is impossible for me to aid you, monsieur."

"You mistake; you have admittance, in your uniform, to the hall, and can procure me a ticket in some way."

"The tickets are two eagles each, monsieur."

"I know the price, and I know each buyer has to give guarantee of respectability, or be known to the committee; I prefer to remain unknown."

"Oh, ciel! I fear I cannot aid you," and the *gendarme* looked wistfully at the gold in the hand of Merle.

"Is there no *gendarme* officer who will not attend to-night?"

"Out, monsieur, oui! The captain of my company was called from quarters this afternoon, to visit his father who is ill, and he left his ticket upon his open dressing-case. I saw it there when I gave him the message calling him away, and I think I can get it; but it is worth my place if caught."

"*Gendarme*, here are ten eagles for you; bring me a ticket to the *Sainte Louis* to-night, and I will double these I now give you. I am in earnest. Come to the Cabaret d'Orleans and ask for Don Leon Merlino; do you understand?"

"*Sacre!* how could I help it, monsieur? You shall have the ticket if—if I have to—steal it."

"*Merci!* I will await you!"

So saying, Merle turned on his heel and walked away; he had accomplished his object, and would have paid far more than he did, to attend the Carnival Masquerade at the *Salon Sainte Louis*.

CHAPTER XXXV.

NEPTUNE AND THE SEA.

THE scene of the grand *bal masque*, held the last night of Carnival, was the *Hotel Sainte Louis*, a magnificent edifice, combining an exchange, hotel, bank, and ball-salons, with their antechambers.

The main front was on the *Rue St. Louis*, and hither, as early as eight o'clock, the carriages of the aristocracy began to arrive and deposit their human freight—all *en masque*.

At nine o'clock a *coupe* dashed up to the door, and a single occupant stepped forth, the costume which he evidently wore concealed by a long black cloak, and his face by a mask of silk of the same hue.

Ascending the broad stairway, he gave his gilt-edged ticket to a lieutenant of *gendarmes*, appointed to receive them, and passed into the anteroom for swords and robes, where a *gendarme* received his arms, a pair of handsomely mounted pistols and short sword, for gentlemen were not allowed to enter the *salon* armed, under a heavy penalty.

Throwing aside his domino he appeared as the impersonator of Neptune, and his perfect costume was the admiration of all who saw him, for it was rich in the extreme, while a necklace of superb diamonds encircled his neck, and to it was suspended an anchor of princely rubies, the lights from the precious stones dazzling the eyes of the lookers-on.

Entering the grand saloon a scene of gorgeous beauty and splendor met his eyes. He stood a moment, gazing upon the life and magnificence, with the murmur of voices rising like distant thunder, the regular tread of dancing feet, and the crash of music.

Then he began to thread his way through the gorgeous throng, his eyes searching right and left for some object, while he was himself the cynosure of all whom he passed near.

Peering into the alcoves which lined the walls, a little raised from the floor, he gave a searching glance at every costume. Whoever he sought he seemed determined to find.

Presently he started. Before him stood four persons in a group, and evidently of the same party and known to each other.

There were two gentlemen and two ladies, one of the former in the full uniform of a captain of the United States navy, and his face securely masked; the other in plain evening dress, yet also wearing a mask.

The lady who hung on the arm of the officer had already won the name of the belle of the *bal masque*, from the exquisite beauty of her costume, and the rare loveliness of her form.

She represented "The Sea," and her dress was formed of the most costly green velvet, silk and satin, woven together so as to look like the deep green waters, while it was capped with lace, worth a small fortune, to resemble foam.

The train extended far back, and upon it were grouped exquisite sea-shells, while around her tiny waist was a girdle of silk, made to imitate seaweed, and a most clever imitation, indeed, it was. A bodice of silver scales, a coronet of beautiful coral, from which fell a gauze veil of Nile-green, and of the finest texture, bracelets and necklaces of large pearls and emeralds, all real stones, a silver anchor hanging to one side, and a coil of golden rope to the other, completed this marvelous and wonderfully beautiful costume, excepting a mask of silver net-work.

The fourth person of the group, who hung on the arm of the gentleman in citizen attire, was also beautiful in form and rarely dressed in crimson velvet and black lace; a mask of exquisite lace also concealing her features.

"Father Neptune seeks The Sea! Make room, all, for Neptune and The Sea!"

The voice rung out above all other sounds, from the lips of some mask whose eyes had suddenly fallen upon the two characters.

At his cry the crowd separated right and left,

and the one who had so earnestly been searching the *salon* found himself face to face with the object of his search.

The cry of the mask, caught up by half a hundred other voices, decided him, and he stepped forward and bent low before the now receding Sea, at finding herself so suddenly made disagreeably conspicuous.

"Old Father Neptune bends low before thy beauty, oh, Sea! and casts the anchor of his hopes at thy fair feet."

As he spoke he offered his arm, while the lady hesitating, her escort, the naval captain, answered for her, for he cared not to lose her society:

"We are not crossing the Equator, Father Neptune, where thou hast a right to shake thy hoary locks in our faces."

"One of thy trade, as thy buttons show, whose calling it is to tinge the green waves with the blood of his fellow-men, should remember he is not upon his own deck now," was the quick retort, and a murmur of applause greeted the reply of old Neptune, while the one addressed, and the lady upon his arm, started at the words.

Then again bending low before The Sea, Neptune continued:

"The dancing of thy waves, oh, Sea, it is ever my joy to behold, and I pray thee allow the winds to waft us through the mazes of this rippling dance."

There was something in the tone of the speaker that caused the one addressed to again start, and glancing down her eye fell upon his hand.

Then, with strange eagerness, she left the arm of the officer, who said, coldly:

"I will await you here."

Another instant and she was floating around the room upon the arm of old Neptune.

One turn of the grand *salon*, to the admiration of all who witnessed the exquisite grace with which both danced, and Neptune drew his companion through an arched doorway out upon a balcony, which had been arranged to serve as a conservatory, for it was filled with fragrant flowers and rare exotics, while a number of little rustic arbors, with silk-cushioned seats here and there, were hidden amid the foliage—the very retreat for lovers.

"The tide sets hitherward, oh, Sea; and we cannot stem the current," and Neptune led his companion into a rustic arbor at the further end of the balcony.

"Oh, Merle!"

With this cry the maiden sunk upon an ottoman.

"You know me, then, Mildred?" said the man, sadly.

"Yes, your voice told me who you were; but, Merle, you are lost—you are lost!"

"I do not understand you, Miss Monteith."

"Wilber Sebastian is here; he returned some days ago."

"I know it. I took you from his arm—I came here to see you, Mildred."

It did not occur to her to ask how he had discovered her; she only trembled at the risk he had run, and repeated again:

"Merle, Merle, why did you come here?"

"I discover that my presence is unwelcome; I will lead you back to Captain Sebastian," he said, bitterly.

"No, no; now you are angry, and without cause. Though I longed to see you, Merle, I wished not that you should come here. Day after day I have waited to hear from you, that I might come to you, wherever you were."

"I have come to you, Mildred."

"But it is death for you to remain here. You are outlawed as a pirate, a deserter, and a mutineer, by your own government, and, condemned to be shot without trial, wherever found, on land or sea."

The man started.

"And this is true, Mildred?"

"Yes; his story was believed, and he has been given another vessel—a sloop-of-war."

"By Heaven! his triumph shall be short-lived. Mildred, do you believe me the guilty being I am said to be?"

"Merle, you know I do not," said the maiden, reproachfully.

"And Captain Grenville?"

"Is at a loss what to believe. He heard Captain Sebastian's statements before the investigating committee, and the sworn testimony of his officers and men, who were with him, and he was exonerated, and you condemned."

"So let it be, for the present. Mildred, I have that proof which will cause Wilber Sebastian to be disgraced, after which, having been driven from the navy, he will fall to my revenge."

"I came here to meet my own faithful crew, or to communicate with them, and have them brought before a naval committee as soon as I could get trial; then the whole truth will come out regarding this terrible affair."

"Merle, I have never believed you guilty, and to prove it I will tell you what carried us to Havana," and Mildred told of the letters received from poor Jack Buntline and her entreaties to follow the schooner, which caused Captain Grenville to pursue in the yacht, all of which Merle already knew, but which he listened to eagerly, from her lips.

"I held no doubt of you, Mildred, or of Captain Grenville; but it pains me to feel that he believes me guilty."

"Merle, he knows not what to think; he has heard everything against you, and nothing in your favor; he has always liked Sebastian, and also Lieutenant Alden, and the secret influence of Estelle is terribly against you."

"He grieves for you, as though you were his own son, but in appearance everything points to your guilt."

"Mildred, I will not now tell you all that I have suffered, or that passed upon that floating hell, the schooner of Wilber Sebastian; but within the month all shall be made clear—"

"Not sooner, Merle?"

"It will be impossible sooner, and perhaps it may take longer, for I have much to do, and have to immediately return to Vera Cruz, from whence I have just come, and as the yacht is my own property, I will take it. I saw it at anchor in the stream as I came up the river."

"Yes, Merton Ainslie is in charge of it, Captain Grenville having sent the crew home to the plantation."

"It is just as well; Ainslie can go with me, and I can secure a crew here."

"But, why return to Vera Cruz, Merle?"

"Duty compels me. I came here to receive letters of importance I expected, but mainly to see you, Mildred, and hear from your own lips you did not believe me guilty."

"No, Merle, I could never doubt you."

"Thank you, my own Mildred! Your words will make me happy in spite of my own sorrow; but I have a revelation to make you, Mildred, that may make me almost criminal in your sight; but not now; not now," and Merle shuddered as he remembered how his back had been scarred with the cruel lash.

Would not this indignity, this felon's punishment, degrade him forever in her sight?"

Such was his mental query, and such had been the thought burning in his brain since the first blow had cut deep into his bare flesh.

"I will write a note to Captain Grenville, telling him I have taken the yacht, and mail it tomorrow, and as soon as I can I will return to plead my cause before the world that has made me so infamous without a hearing."

"And within a month, Merle?"

"Sooner, perhaps, Mildred; perhaps it may take a longer time, for I shall remain a very short while in Vera Cruz, and then return here to work up my defense, though I shall have to do so in disguise."

It did not occur to Merle that his meeting with the Mexican, Major Vistal Guarena, whose challenge he had accepted, had any danger for him.

"But, Mildred," he continued, after a short pause, "if you believe him guilty, why do you appear in public with him?" and there was a shade of jealousy in Merle's voice.

"Because I cannot help it; this costume I had made to wear to this ball, and, you remember, you had promised to run over and accompany me."

"Upon returning from Havana, Captain Grenville and his wife became my guests, and Estelle asked her brother to the mansion, and, biding my time, for I wished no outbreak until I heard from you, I have treated him and his sister with friendly regard, though greatly against my will, and of course I could not refuse him as my escort to-night, for Estelle and Wilber were bent upon coming, and I yielded, and forced smiles to my lips while my heart was full of tears."

"Ah, Merle! you must return soon and brand the lie upon the brow of Wilber Sebastian, or my poor heart must break."

"I am but a girl, and you a mere youth, yet I feel that we are not children, and suffer deeply; so hasten, Merle, to take from your lips and mine this cup of bitterness."

"I swear it, Mildred; if within two months I do not prove myself innocent of the charges against me, then you can believe me the guilty wretch men call me. Now, farewell."

He merely pressed her hand in his own, and led her away from the arbor.

Entering the *salon* they circled once round in the waltz, their hearts full of hopeful joy, dread and pain commingled, and then he left her upon the arm of Wilber Sebastian, and without a word turned away, and disappeared from the earnest eyes of Mildred, that followed his retreating form.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE YACHT MAKES A VOYAGE.

WHEN Merle left the *Salon Sainte Louis* he passed out into the street, still crowded with many maskers, and calling to a *cabriolet* that was passing, ordered the driver to go with all speed to the *Cabaret d'Orleans*.

Upon his arrival he quickly paid his score, packed up his things, and carpet-bag in hand returned to the waiting vehicle.

Giving the address he desired to stop at, Merle threw himself back on the cushions and was lost in deep thought, until the driver drew rein upon the quay.

Handing him a piece of money, Merle looked around the deserted wharf for a boat, and finding a small skiff, sprung in, and seizing the oars was soon flying over the murky waters.

In five minutes he was alongside a small vessel, on the deck of which he the next instant stood.

"Hulloa! who have we here?" cried a voice, and a man stepped from the cabin.

"Ah! Ainslie, I am glad to have found you. I feared you, like all others in the city, had gone carnival-mad, and would be away. Are you alone?"

"I am, sir, excepting an old shipmate who came aboard to keep me company with a bottle of wine and cigar; but you are unknown to me," and Merton Ainslie gazed earnestly into the face before him, for Merle had resumed his disguise of an old man.

"Ah! I forgot; I am he whom men call Merle, the Mutineer, deserter, pirate, or whatso'er you will," said the youth, bitterly.

"Mr. Grenville! I am indeed glad to see you! I knew not you were in New Orleans, and your disguise is most complete."

"Yes, I came here upon important business, and I must leave to-night for Vera Cruz, and in the yacht; but I will return hither after a short delay in Mexico. Will you accompany me there?"

"With pleasure, sir; but—"

"I know what you would say—Captain Grenville left you in charge of the yacht; but the vessel, Mr. Ainslie, is my own, and not an hour ago I left Captain Grenville and his party at the *Salon Sainte Louis*, where I made known to Miss Monteith my intention of going to Vera Cruz, and she it was that told me I would find you here."

"I have nothing to say, sir; the yacht, I know, is yours; but there is no crew."

"That is a secondary matter, for you can easily procure one, and at once. Is the vessel stored?"

"Not for more than two days' cruise."

"Here is gold. You have a companion with you, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"A seaman?"

"Yes, sir; and out of a berth."

"He shall have one; I will make you my first luff, your friend my second; call him, please."

In answer to the call of Merton Ainslie, a young man stepped on deck, and, by the light of the cabin that fell upon him, Merle saw a good-looking face, marked by recklessness and dissipation, and a compact form, under the medium height.

This was Merton Ainslie's shipmate, Louis Chandeaur by name, and a Louisiana Creole, who, with his companion, had been a midshipman in the navy, from which the two had been dismissed for some wild escapade.

Since his dismissal Louis Chandeaur had gone steadily down hill, until he had lately served before the mast in a coaster; but, made of better material, Merton Ainslie had been endeavoring to hold his head up among his peers as a gentleman, for he came of a good family, yet poor one.

"Mr. Chandeaur, I intend sailing in the yacht to-night, and I wish a crew. I will make you my second officer, Ainslie being my first; will you sail with me?"

"Yes, sir," promptly answered the young man, asking no questions as to destination or anything else.

"Can you secure me a crew of ten men within the hour?"

"Yes, sir; by giving them extra pay, and some gold in hand."

"Here is gold; I want only good men."

"I will get you men who will be saints or devils as you desire, sir," and the young man smiled.

"Enough; return here within the hour with them, or as soon after as you can. Now, Ainslie, how long will it take you to get stores?"

"I know a merchant who lives near here, sir; his store is yonder on the levee. I will rouse him, and gold will soon bring him to terms."

"Very well; I will write some letters, and meet you at the pier within an hour, with the yacht's boats."

"You and Chandeaur go ashore in my skiff," and going into the cabin Merle sat down at a rosewood desk and for half an hour was busy writing to those of the mutineer crew whom he wished to meet him in New Orleans upon his return.

He also wrote Captain Grenville a short note telling him he had taken the yacht, but would be back in the city before very long.

In the meantime the two friends rowed away from the vessel to the pier, Louis Chandeaur asking:

"Who is the old cove, Mert? He talks as though he knew what he was about."

"He does, Lou, and before the voyage is ended you may know who he is; now, I can tell you nothing."

"Don't care, Mert; ar'n't inquisitive in the least."

"His gold has the ring of true metal, and he is lavish with it, for I've got enough to drown me if I tumble overboard; must be careful."

"You must be careful, Lou, not to tumble into a spree now that you have money. If you come back drunk the captain would set you ashore."

"Don't doubt it, Mert; will take care of that."

"I'm going to Palpito's cabaret, and I can get there a crew of Frenchmen, Spaniards, Americans and West India niggers—if the captain wants 'em to up-anchor, furl top-sails and the like, all he's got to do is to damn 'em and they'll do it, for they know just what to do when they get cursed from the quarter-deck."

"I found this out in my last cruise to Honduras; such a crew saves much talking, and a few *onzas* to the *padre* will save his soul as far as the swearing goes."

"Nothing like it when you want anything done, Mert."

"Which, Lou, the swearing or the *onzas*?"

"Both; what cursing won't do, gold will."

"But just to think, awhile since I was a *pauvre diable*, taking a glass of *noyau* with you; my expectations nothing, my worldly possessions my clothing, which is slightly 'tattered and torn,' as daylight will show—oh! what a dresser-up of the beggar is darkness, Mert—"

"Always joking, Lou."

"I find a man lives longer on jokes than groans, Mert; a joke sounds better on an empty stomach, and a laugh staves off for an hour the pangs of hunger; with patience, a crumb here, a bone there, a laugh, a joke, and some philosophy a man can starve and not die outright."

"But you changed the golden current of my thoughts, *amigo*; I was saying that I was no longer

a miserable, but with gold in my lockers, hope in my heart, and the prospect of a *bon voyage*."

"But, here is the pier; in an hour, or soon after, I will be here with my mixed breed of seamen," and bounding ashore the gay young profligate darted away upon his mission.

In the time specified Merle was at the wharf with the yacht's two boats, and, shortly after, Merton Ainslie appeared, accompanied by a dray well loaded.

The load was cast off and the driver sent back for a second load, just as Louis Chandeaur returned with his crew.

Whatever might be said of the dissimilarity of the dozen men he brought with him, as regarded their personal appearance, they were all strangely alike in one particular—drunk!

But Louis had kept his word, and was sober, and commenced the practice of his advice to Merton Ainslie, by cursing the men into the boats, when Merle's stern tones soon brought order out of chaos, and had all on board the yacht, which, just as the gray of dawn appeared over the distant house-tops, glided swiftly down the river, a five-knot breeze sending her merrily along, and her sails well set in spite of the drunken crew; but, however intoxicated a true seaman may be, he can generally attend to duty.

When the yacht was out in the Gulf the discipline on board was perfect, for, notwithstanding his failings, Louis Chandeaur was as good a sailor as was Merton Ainslie, and that was saying no little in his favor, while as a commander, young as he was, Merle had few superiors.

As if to favor this waif of fortune, the winds blew steadily and strong, and the yacht was kept under all the canvas that she could bear, and run into the harbor of Vera Cruz in what, in those days, before steamers plied the ocean, was a remarkably short time.

And still she could have made port a few hours sooner, had not Merle purposely shortened sail to make an anchorage after nightfall.

"Mr. Ainslie, I would like to see you, sir, in the cabin."

The yacht was now anchored before the city, and Merton Ainslie followed Merle into the cabin.

"Mr. Ainslie, I think I can trust you, sir."

"Assuredly, sir."

"I came back to Vera Cruz for a special purpose, and though I make known the circumstance to you, I wish it, under no circumstances, to be known to others; do you understand?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Grenville."

"Very well; I have an affair of honor to settle here with Major Vistal Guarena, of the Castle San Juan de Uloa. It will be a private matter, for, when I accepted his challenge, I did not expect to have you with me in Vera Cruz at the time the duel was to be fought."

"I expect the meeting will be to-morrow, or next day; if not, very soon after, and I am going to the hotel to remain."

"If I am not back on the yacht one week from to-morrow, or you have not heard from me, I will be dead, and I wish you to return to New Orleans and report to Captain Grenville."

"In the inner drawer of this desk you will find a package addressed to Miss Mildred Monteith, and to her I wish you to deliver it in person, for it is of the greatest value, and the papers of the utmost importance; they are all in this little box and here is the key."

"I hope I will have no use for the key, sir, for I trust you will come out all right," said Merton Ainslie, warmly.

"I expect to, Ainslie, for, without vanity, I may say I have a quick and sure eye with a pistol, and a strong arm and a skillful hand with a sword."

"I have no dread whatever of meeting a foe with either weapon; but then, accidents will sometimes happen, and 'tis best to be prepared, and I repeat, if, by to-morrow week, I am not here, or you have not heard from me, return to New Orleans in the yacht."

"Here is plenty of gold for your expenses, and to pay off the men, besides a good *bonus* for you and Chandeaur. Now, call one of the boats to the gangway to put me on shore."

Merton Ainslie obeyed the order, and wrung his commander's hand, as he went over the side, in farewell.

In half an hour more Don Leon Merlino, *Ranchero*, from Corpus Christi, was again on the hotel books, and that personage, divested of his disguise, was enjoying a substantial dinner, after having dispatched a messenger to Major Vistal Guarena to inform him that, true to his word, he had come back to Vera Cruz for the honor of meeting him in the *duello*; nor was that the only motive that carried him back to Mexico—he hoped to learn from the lips of Don Felipe Cosala, the Monte Prince, why he had shown such hatred toward him, when a mere boy, as to slay those who were his protectors, and carry him from his home.

Merle had determined to hold the Monte Prince answerable for the past.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FALSE!

"My God! was man ever tempted thus? And thus tempted, did man ever resist?"

The cry, for a cry it was, came from the lips of Merton Ainslie.

He was seated in the cabin of the yacht, the companionway locked, and before him lay an open box. His head rested in his hands, and his face was haggard and white.

The little vessel was gliding swiftly along, having dropped the sunny land of Mexico astern a few hours before.

Then, when the frowning turrets of the San Juan de Uloa were no longer visible, Merton Ainslie had left the deck in charge of Louis Chandeaur and gone into the cabin.

Rising quickly from his seat, he began to pace to and fro, his walk extending necessarily but a few steps; but he cared not for that.

"I more than did what he asked," he muttered; "I waited ten days, instead of one week, and upon going to the hotel they told me he had gone out a week before one evening, and had never returned. He is dead! I know he is dead, poor fellow!"

"Well, there lies my temptation to do wrong, and I am yielding."

He took up a bundle of papers as he spoke and glanced over them.

"These tell the story of where the guilt lay in that mutiny, and he gives the address of each one of the seamen who will swear to the truth of his statement; would to God he had lived to have brought Wilber Sebastian to justice, and then I would not have been so tempted."

"If she reads these papers, she will see that he is innocent—ay, if she reads the papers, these must go with them."

As he spoke he held up in his hand the diamond necklace and ruby anchor already known to the reader.

"These are alone enough to tempt a saint, and I never was even good."

"Then his dirk, with its gem-studded hilt in the shape of an anchor, and the gold scabbard with its precious stones!"

"And this ring! Holy Neptune! what a stone!"

"Lucifer, sympathize with me, for thou didst fall from heaven to hell."

Again he sprang to his feet and paced the room for a long time, to once more resume his seat.

"Had I never met her to know her, the generous allowance of gold he left to square accounts would have been enough for me; but, Mildred Monteith, your ravishing beauty is what tempts me to this sin."

"*Pardieu!* you, ah, woman, as in the days of Adam, art still a temptress. Yes, Mildred Monteith, I love you so deeply, that I lose my soul to gain you."

"Ha! ha! ha! these jewels, disposed of through the grasping Israelites, will give me gold far beyond the wealth of Mildred Monteith."

"Then, with riches at my command, I will seek and win you, proud beauty; for I will sympathize with you in the ignominy of him whom you trusted. You must never know that he was innocent; for, thus knowing, you would *revere* his memory. No, you must *hate* him, even dead, and then I can work on your heart with better hopes of success."

"Let me see—the gems in the scabbard of this dirk shall go first; they will get me a handsome home in the edge of the city, furnish it luxuriously, and fit me out with horses and carriages; besides, now I look at them again, they should run the establishment for several months."

"Merton Ainslie, you are a made man! No more tar-stained fingers—no more weary deck watches—no more two-franc dinners, with cloudy claret to wash down tough steaks."

"No, my boy, you will feast on the fat of the land, and take to your heart the most beautiful girl in New Orleans."

"Well, what a change! From a poor sailor to a rich swell about town."

"And all thrown into my hands without the asking!"

"Be still, accursed conscience. How dare you raise grim specters before my diamond-blind eyes, for can I see through the sparkling beauty of these precious stones?"

"No, no; but I wish all had been diamonds. These are emeralds in this gold scabbard, and they mean, perhaps, I am *green* for falling as I do when tempted; and here are pearls—do these suggest that Mildred Monteith is a 'pearl beyond price,' or winning?"

"And these rubies! they are red, and blood is red."

"Bah! why do I shudder?"

"And here is a superb opal in the head of this dirk hilt, and 'tis said that opals bring misfortune—and it's curiously suggestive in a dirk hilt—a pointed reminder, perhaps."

"Well, the die is cast, and here goes! I accept the alternative, come what may."

Carefully he placed the precious stones back in their receptacle, returned to the inner drawer of the desk, and locking it, carefully put the key away from sight.

The papers he then rolled up in a package, and ascended to the deck.

Watching his opportunity, when no one was looking, he dropped them into the sea.

"Mert, old fellow, you are as white as the ghost of your grandmother; the death of the captain has unnerved you," said Louis Chandeaur, joining him, as the roll of papers sunk from sight beneath the blue waters.

"Yes, I am not well, and I was greatly attached to the captain."

"And the yellow fever carried him off? Yellow Jack will get the best of strangers, whenever they come to this port; was he sick long?"

"Not long, Lou; but he left the men treble what they bargained for, and you and I get a cool thousand apiece."

"Saint Jonah's whale! I will be a millionaire on a small scale."

"Let me see; I'll dine at the *Cafe Sainte Louis*, and if my worthy uncle, Simon Levy, has not disposed of my watch and chain, and sundry other articles that go to make up a gentleman's wardrobe, I will cut a swell on the *Rue Royale*."

"Lou, stop your nonsense and listen to me."

"All attention, Mert."

"You are poor?"

"As a church-mouse—until I get that thousand pesos."

"Hush! will you make me a promise, if I put you in the way of making a fortune?"

"I'll make you a thousand promises, Mert."

"No, two will do, and if you pledge yourself sacredly to keep those I will do something handsome by you when we return to the city."

"The promise, Mert, for you seem in earnest."

"I am in earnest; you have two vices."

"Now you are joking; there are not *two* that I have not laid up against me."

"You are not as bad as that; but you will drink and gamble."

"Fact! I lose my wits by the former, and my money by the latter."

"You have a mother and sister who love you, Lou."

The young man's face changed color at once.

"Don't speak of my poor old mother, and of Fidele, Mert; I have disgraced their name long since; it is the one arrow in my heart."

"Then it is time you began reform."

"Satan rebuking sin," said Lou, in a mischievous voice.

"I know it, and that shot hits harder than you have any idea, Lou; but we can all preach to others, while our own lives are stained. Never mind; promise me, upon your sacred word of honor, and by the love you hold for your mother and sister, that you will never again drink to intoxication or gamble."

"I swear it, Mert; I have not tasted liquor since I left New Orleans, and I do not feel the need of it now. As for gambling, I have thrown money away at cards that should have bought bread for my mother and sister; but, tell me, Merton Ainslie, where did you find a gold-mine?"

It was another random shot that hit home, and the one to whom it was addressed colored and turned away, while he said, pleasantly:

"My gold-mine is in perspective, Lou; you know I have a rich uncle in New York, who is an old bachelor?"

"That's so; is the old man in ill-health? I ask from no idle curiosity of course."

"A letter, received ere I left, stated he was not in his usual good health, and you know I am his only heir," and no more was said on the subject then; but, when the yacht let fall her anchor before the city of New Orleans, Merton Ainslie, after paying off the crew and giving to Louis Chandeaur his thousand dollars, found an important letter awaiting him from a New York lawyer.

Eagerly he broke the seal and read of the death of his uncle, and that he was his sole heir.

"Worth but thirty thousand dollars—subject to my draft in bank—I thought he was worth much more; but, what care I now?"

"Had it been five times thirty, and I had not destroyed those papers, I might have resisted the temptation to—Bah! it is foolish for me to talk thus; ah! here is an affix to the letter—I read carelessly."

After reading what had before escaped his eye, he continued:

"This gives me twenty thousand more, if I desire to take that price, cash, for the mansion, and which cannot be worth much more."

"Yes, I'll write at once, taking the price offered, and now I will not have to touch the jewels for some time; let me see, I must keep my word to Lou, and shall buy a fine brig, give him a half share in it, and make him captain—that will ease my conscience considerably, for I owe it to him, as I intend to give Fidele up, now that Mildred Monteith is my game."

"She must only think I had a friendly, no, I'll call it a *brotherly*, regard for her, and my generosity to her brother will easily make her forget any affection she held for me, for I know she does love me just a little; she has said so."

A few moments more Merton Ainslie paced the deck of the yacht, and then, all duties having been attended to, he landed and drove to the home of Mildred Monteith.

As he rung at the massive portal for admission, he muttered:

"Great God! must I meet that woman with a lie on my lips?"

"Yes, the Rubicon is passed now; I cannot step backward."

"Now, Merton Ainslie, smother the pangs of conscience, and put on the mask you must henceforth wear through life—the mask of a man of honor, to hide the heart and face of a criminal. Oh! what will not both man and woman do for love?"

The opening of the heavy portal made him start guiltily; but, controlling his emotion, he stepped within the court, and the door closed behind him, shutting him out forever from a life of true manhood.

He had proven false, utterly false, to the trust placed in him by Merle.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SOWING THE WIND.

WHEN Merton Ainslie promised to aid Louis Chandeaur, it was no idle boast, for he was anxious to do so, as he had always liked the gay youth, and it was his having suggested the wild *escapade* that had resulted in their being dismissed from the navy.

Another motive had Merton Ainslie for his friendship, and that was the sweet Fidele, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed sister of Louis Chandeaur, who, with her mother, lived in a small cottage in the outskirts of New Orleans.

This little cottage with its acre of ground, Jemima, Fidele's old nurse, Gabriel, the husband of the negress, Blucher the horse, Bossy the cow, and half a hundred chickens, were all the worldly possessions that Mrs. Chandeaur could boast of; once it had been different, but the wild career of Louis, his scrapes and extravagances had dwindled away the inheritance, until the widow and her daughter had come down to the little home near the city; here, with the aid of the needle of the mother, and paint-brush of Fidele, who was no mean artist, the two barely secured a comfortable living, while the scapegrace son and brother spent his days in riotous living, and short cruises to get wine and card-money.

Before going with Captain Grenville upon the yacht, Merton Ainslie had held a position as supercargo of a New Orleans and Havana packet, and when in the former city always passed his evenings at the cottage home of the widow, and, try to disguise it as he would in his own mind, he had loved Fidele, and the two were engaged.

Through the kind word of a friend his destiny led him on board the yacht, and before the brilliant beauty of Mildred Monteith, the sweet face of Fidele faded away.

Still the young man might have been true to his first love, had not the terrible temptation beset him after he left Merle in Vera Cruz, and carried back with him an immense fortune in precious stones.

Before the flashes of these, and under the remembrance of Mildred's beauty, added to an almost certainty that his deed would never be discovered, Merton Ainslie fell from grace.

When he entered the portal of the Monteith mansion, he asked for Mildred.

She was in and alone, Captain Grenville and his wife having returned to the plantation, and Wilber Sebastian had taken up his quarters at the Hotel Sainte Louis; so the visitor was told, and he sent up his card.

When Merton Ainslie entered the room into which he was ushered, to await the coming of the fair owner of the mansion, he glanced searchingly around him.

It was a reception-parlor, and furnished in the most expensive luxury, containing every article that could cater to both taste and comfort, for the Monteiths had come down from father to son as born millionaires, and Mildred had been the one upon whom at last the golden mantle had fallen.

The magnificence of his surroundings almost took his breath away, accustomed as Merton Ainslie had been to move in good society, and he gazed spell-bound upon the broad mirrors in massive frames glittering with gold and silver; the gorgeousness of the velvet draperies of the two tall windows *a deux battans*, opening upon a balcony that overlooked the garden; the costly girandoles, the ottomans, the *fauteuil*, and the oriental velvet covered lounge of blue velvet to match the curtains, and trimmed with gold and silver fringe half a foot deep; the marble pier-tables with their costly porcelain vases, the rare-bound volumes scattered around as if for use and not to be looked at only; the choice and costly paintings hanging from the tinted walls, and many other little elegancies too numerous to particularize, caused the visitor to take a solemn oath there and then that he would yet be lord and master over that grand old home.

Only one of the cressets in the gold and crystal chandelier was lighted; but it gave light sufficient for Merton Ainslie to take a good view of himself in the full length mirrors, and mentally decide that he was looking his best, the paleness of his face, called up by the daring and dangerous game he was playing, but adding more attraction to his decidedly handsome features.

Upon the yacht, during the voyage to Havana and back, Mildred had seen in Merton Ainslie, a fine looking young sailor, in duck pants, blue shirt and tarpaulin, who was ever most polite and attentive to her, and whom she had heard was brought up a gentleman, and a naval officer, from which latter position his crop of "wild oats," when reaped, had secured his dismissal.

Now, as she entered the room, she beheld an elegantly attired man, with dark, bronzed face and earnest eyes, who, with the air of a courtier, came forward and bowed before her.

Mildred knew the young sailor had gone with Merle, and she extended her hand kindly:

"Welcome back, Mr. Ainslie; I am glad to see you. Be seated, please."

Merton Ainslie quietly obeyed, and Mildred continued:

"I feel that you have news for me, Mr. Ainslie, from one whom I may say is our mutual friend?"

"Miss Monteith!" and there was something foreboding in the calm voice; "Miss Monteith, I have news for you, and from one who was our mutual friend."

"Was! do I understand aright, sir? Have you, too, turned against Merle Grenville?"

There was a flash in the eyes that Merton Ainslie did not at all like; but he continued:

"I was as true as steel to Mr. Grenville, dear lady, until he proved his own enemy."

"I do not understand?" faintly said Mildred.

"I will explain as well as I can. I left here in the yacht with Mr. Grenville, the last night of *carnival*, and we ran to Vera Cruz, arriving there at night."

"From him I learned that it was his object to secure there some important witnesses in his favor, but I have since learned that such was not the case."

"Mr. Ainslie, remember well your words, sir—you accuse Mr. Grenville of falsehood," and the sweet voice was threatening.

"I make no charges, Miss Monteith. Mr. Grenville left the yacht at Vera Cruz, carrying with him a number of articles which he had gotten in New Orleans."

"He told me he would return in two days, and when the third came round and I saw nothing of him, I set forth in search, leaving Mr. Chandeaur and the crew on the yacht."

"After careful search I returned, convinced of one thing—that Mr. Grenville had felt his inability to give the lie to the charges against him, and had leagued himself with a crew of Mexican buccaneers."

"Mr. Ainslie, take those words back and I will be your slave. For the love of God, do not tell me that Merle Grenville is really the guilty being men call him, and, lost to all honor, has leagued himself with pirates! I beseech you, Merton Ainslie, to take back your words!" and the beautiful girl dropped upon her knees before the man, and stretched forth her jeweled hands.

"Rise, Miss Monteith! This is not your place. I should kneel to you, never you to me."

"Would to God I could retract what I have said," he cried, earnestly, and he meant it, for the deep grief of the maiden moved him strangely.

"It is true then?"

Mildred sprung quickly to her feet and faced him—deadly pale, her bosom heaving, but perfectly calm.

"It is true; I tracked him to the rendezvous of the pirates, and disguising myself as one of the band, I discovered that he had already sailed with a picked crew to Havana, for the purpose of stealing away the beautiful Cuban maiden, whom he had served years before, and who loved him deeply—I refer to the one who aided his escape from the *Moro*."

"It was said that he intended to bring her back with him as Queen of the Buccaneers."

"Upon returning to the yacht at Vera Cruz, I found this note awaiting me."

Merton Ainslie drew from his pocket a crumpled note, and handed it to the maiden.

She glanced over it, and while a curl of scorn rested upon her lip, read in what appeared to be the handwriting of Merle:

"MR. MERTON AINSLIE,

"Yacht *Snow Cloud*,

"Vera Cruz Harbor:

"SIR:—Return in the yacht to New Orleans, and report to Captain Grenville, if there; if not, run round the Balize to his plantation home and there leave the vessel, or do as he orders, for, from the reception of this note, you are no longer under my command."

"In an inner drawer of my desk you will find gold

sufficient to pay yourself and crew, and for expenses, and I leave all to you to settle."

"Having accomplished the object of my visit to Vera Cruz, I will remain here to cast my lot with those brave spirits among whom my earlier years were passed."

"Thus let me die before the world—a cruel world that will brand me ever now as mutineer, deserter and pirate."

"So let it be—I am content."

"Within an inner compartment of my desk you will find a ring—a solitaire diamond, set in a band of solid red gold."

"Take this ring to Miss Mildred Monteith, Rue St. Louis, New Orleans, and tell her this is a souvenir of Freelance, the Buccaneer, and his son, Merle, the Mutineer."

"Should we meet on the rolling blue waves, Ainslie, for you are a sailor, I will remember you as you carry out my injunctions with this ring and the yacht—obey, and the black folds of my flag shall never cast shadow on you; fail me, and I will hunt you to the end of the earth—ay, to the nethermost abyss of hell."

"MERLE, THE OUTLAW."

This very peculiar epistle Merton Ainslie had concocted from what he had found in the papers sent to Mildred, wherein he had told her that he was the son of Freelance the Buccaneer, to whom the ring had belonged, and which he had inherited from his father along with the necklace, anchor and dirk.

But more than this of his past, Merle had not made known.

Carefully did the young man watch the maiden as she slowly read the forged letter; but her face was emotionless; save for its marble-like paleness it would be thought she did not suffer.

"The ring, if you please, Mr. Ainslie."

He quietly handed it to her, and she placed it upon her marriage-finger.

"It is exceedingly handsome; the finest stone I ever saw, and I have occasionally seen Mr. Grenville wear it."

"He had it on the night of the *bai masque*, I recall now."

"I thank you, Mr. Ainslie, from my heart I thank you, for all you have done for me, and I am going to beg that what has occurred may never pass your lips."

"Never! I shall hold all inviolate, Miss Monteith."

"Again I thank you; this ring I will keep and wear—the stone will keep me in mind of how hard a man's heart may be, and how adamant a woman's may become. What! going? Come and see me again."

Merton Ainslie grasped the little hand in parting, and left the mansion.

Once out in the street he muttered:

"That is over, and well done too. Hang me! she took the ring! I expected she would crush it under her feet, or refuse to touch it; but, never mind, I have plenty left, and I'll get it back when she's my wife, for I had a failing for that stone."

"How cool she was too! did not seem to care. Well, women are curiosities in petticoats," and he walked gayly along, not knowing that Mildred had fallen her full length upon the velvet carpet as soon as his back was turned, and then lay unconscious in her beautiful room.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM.

SOME weeks after the visit of Merton Ainslie to Mildred Monteith, Mrs. Chandeaur and Fidele sat in the cosy sitting-room of their cottage, talking together of the absent Louis, from whom they had not heard for several months.

The mother was a tall, slender, sad-eyed woman of fifty, with the seal of disease stamped upon her face, for she was slowly fading away, though neither she nor her daughter suspected it.

Fidele was a fairy-like little beauty, with a face of sunshine that was often like an April sky, as clouds of snow swept over it.

There was a look of resolution in her mouth, and an intensity of passion in her dark-blue eyes, which at times were almost black.

Her figure was *petite*, and well-formed, and her dress fitted her to perfection—a creamy lawn, made with her own hands.

At her side stood an easel and upon it was a half-finished portrait, which was near enough completed to recognize the original as being Merton Ainslie.

"I wish Merton would return, mother, for well as I know his face, there are some lines I do not recall about the mouth!"

The widow looked up and smiled; to finish the portrait was not the only reason Fidele desired the return of Merton—she wished him ever by her.

"He will soon be back, I hope, Fidele, for I long to see if he cannot find out for us where Louis is; I am really anxious about him," said the mother, sadly.

"And so am I, *ma mere*: I do wish Lou would stop his wild life, and become a true man, as he can be."

"Speak of the Devil and his imps will appear."

The voice was cheery, and both recognized it, before Louis Chandeaur darted into the room, kissed his mother and gave his sister half-a-dozen loud smacks.

"That *smacks* of the sea, hey, sis? Well, I am glad to get home," and the truant threw himself down into an easy-chair, and then, for the first time in his life, observed the thin face and sickly pallor of his mother.

"It is I that have done this! Well, all is over now," he mentally ejaculated, and his face wore a smile that those, who so fondly loved him, had not seen there for several years.

The change for the better in Louis Chandeaur was positively startling; his face was bronzed by the sea, but then its bloated and red look had gone, and the eyes were bright and clear.

He was dressed in an undress half-uniform suit of dark blue, and wore a cap with a gold cord across the visor, while his diamond anchor breastpin, presented to him by the crew of the brig-of-war on which he had been a middy, for saving the life of a seaman—glittered in his immaculate shirt-front, and his watch—

chain hung from the fob, two articles the mother had not seen for many a long day, and which they had looked upon among the things that were.

"Louis, my boy, you seem most happy; I am glad to see you looking so well," said Mrs. Chantelure, with a sad remembrance of how often he came home, flushed with wine, seedy in dress, and reckless.

"I am happy, mother; I am as gay as a sea-gull after a ship biscuit, and I have cause to be; but, do not watch me so, sister mine, for I am not, as usually is the case, drunk; *sur ma parole d'honneur, chère sœur!*" he said, as she glanced somewhat anxiously at him.

"No more cabarets for me; no more rioting and card-playing, for I have said to vices 'get thee behind me, Satan,' and they got; so I'm ahead."

"But to take a reef in my tongue and come down to a steady breeze—I am rich!"

"Rich!" echoed both voices, while the mother added:

"If you are good, Louis, as you say you are, I will care far more than if you were worth thousands."

"I am both, mother; now listen and I will tell you all."

"The last night of *Carnival*, I was a *pauvre diable*, sipping a glass of wine with Merton Ainslie in the little yacht his good luck had got him command of, and a good angel drifted across our bows, in the shape of an old gentleman, who gave me a berth as second luff with him to Vera Cruz."

"But there Yellow Jack"—Merton Ainslie had told all others, except Mildred Monteith, that the yellow fever had caused the death of Merle—"got hold of the good old man, and he left Ainslie to run the craft back, gave the crew treble wages, and Mert and myself a cool thousand dollars."

"Arriving in port here, we found the owner of the yacht had gone to his home on the lake shore, and we collected the crew and took the vessel there."

"When we came back strange things had happened, for Merton Ainslie's old uncle in New York had died leaving him an enormous fortune—what is the matter, sis?"

"I am so glad for Merton, brother."

"Yes, yes, upon the principle of 'with all my worldly goods I thee endow,' ha, ha! But I won't tease you, Fidele, but go on with my story."

"Now, Mert showed himself the true man he is, and kept a promise he made me if I would give up the two worst of my many vices—which was to set me up in business."

"Three days ago he gave me in hand fifteen thousand dollars, telling me to go and pick out the best vessel I could find, and purchase it, which I did in short order, securing a brigantine of splendid carrying capacity, some five hundred tons burden, and a witch for sailing."

"She had to go at forced sale and I got her for twelve thousand down, and she is in trim for sea without extra expense."

"Mert then told me to get a suitable crew, and I secured a half a score seamen, two mates, a cook and cabin-boy, making fourteen all told."

"Then I got some little barkers—"

"Little what, my son?"

"Barkers! bull-dogs! sixes! Oh, bother it all, *cannon*, mother; six of them and a Long Tom, an eighteen."

"Who, Louis?"

"A Long Tom—that is an eighteen-pounder large gun. Thus the crew is made up, and the vessel complete."

"And you are to be captain, Louis?"

"Captain, ay, mother, and owner, too, for Merton first gave me a *half* share in the brigantine and I actually swooned away; when I came back to consciousness he gave me the whole vessel and all, and—I died."

"Oh, Louis!"

"Oh, my son!"

It was all that the mother and daughter could say in their astonishment and joy.

After a glance at the faces of his sister and mother, Louis went on in the same off-hand manner:

"It's a fact, dead sure! I am now *Captain* Louis Chantelure, of the brigantine *Fidele*, bound from New Orleans to Monte Video, for my vessel is now loading for that port, with a cargo of which I am one-fifth owner, for Mert turned over the balance of the fifteen thousand to me, and I invested most of it; but I leave you, mother and Fidele, the one thousand which I got in my cruise on the yacht," and the young sailor counted out the golden eagles from his belt, at the same time enjoying the surprise of his most attentive lookers-on.

At length the mother sadly asked:

"When do you sail, Louis?"

"In three days, mother."

"So soon? And how long will you be away?"

"Six months, I expect, perhaps longer though, as I shall bring back a cargo."

"And Merton, where is he?" asked Fidele.

"Busy as my uncle Simon—I mean busy as a pawn-broker in dull times. You see he is buying an elegant house up-town, and furnishing it handsomely, and with carriages, horses and servants, he intends to cut a swell."

Fidele blushed: she felt she knew the bird he was preparing his cage for.

Alas, poor girl, she knew not how frail was the nature of mankind!

And yet, joy had again come to the hearts of Mrs. Chantelure and her daughter, and the two knelt long at their prayers that night, asking blessings upon the head of the noble friend who had made them so happy, and praying that the wandering son and brother might never more go astray.

Ah, gentle reader, what poor blind mortals we all are in this world; and yet happy was it for a while that the vision of the mother and daughter was obscured by the bright rays of hope, for they saw not the clouds gathering around the horizon of their anticipations, to cast in gloom their sunny skies, for gold oftentimes brings with it a bitter, lasting curse, and none there are who ever find gold without alloy.

But what the future held for them and the other characters of my romance of "Merle the Mutineer," will be told in the sequel, entitled "MONTEZUMA THE MERCILESS: OR, AFTER MANY LONG YEARS."

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